Russ Farrell
Border Patrolman

Thomson Burtis

John Schmittdiel

RUSS FARRELL
BORDER PATROLMAN

Books by Thomson Burtis

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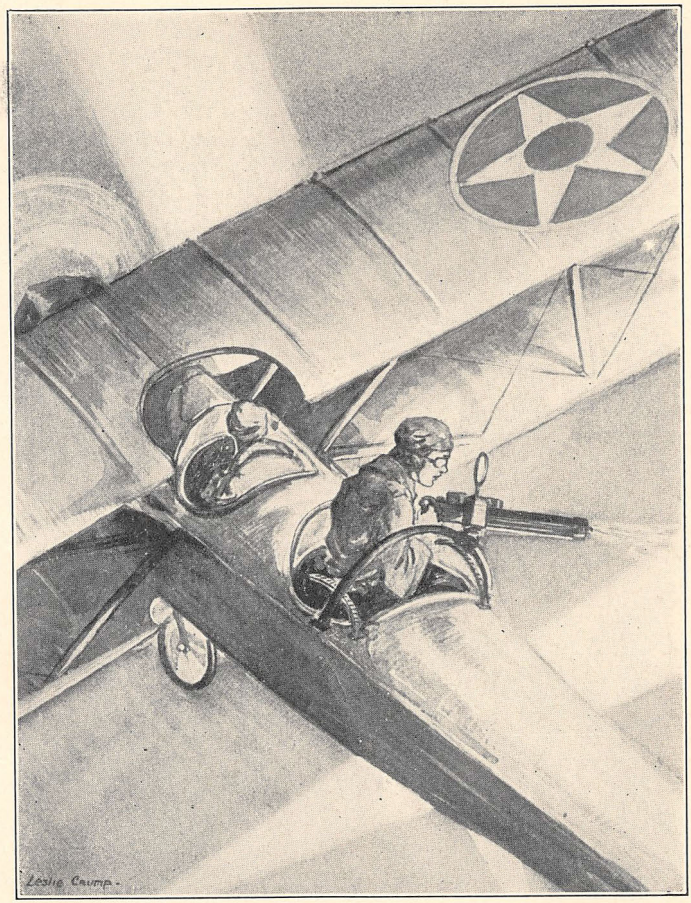
RUSS FARRELL, AIRMAN

RUSS FARRELL, TEST PILOT

RUSS FARRELL, CIRCUS FLYER

RUSS FARRELL, BORDER PATROLMAN



Russ twisted his ship desperately to give Benson a shot.

RUSS FARRELL
BORDER PATROLMAN

An Air Adventure Story for Boys

BY

THOMSON BURTIS

FRONTISPIECE
BY
LESLIE CRUMP

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	BACK TO THE BORDER	1
II.	THE ROUND-UP ON THE RIO GRANDE	37
III.	THE BATTLE OF THE BIG BEND	69
IV.	THE MINE, THE MOB AND MAYFIELD	103
V.	THE DETONATION OF THE DUD	136
VI.	SAND	171
VII.	FOUR MILES HIGH	201

RUSS FARRELL
BORDER PATROLMAN

RUSS FARRELL, BORDER PATROLMAN

CHAPTER I

BACK TO THE BORDER

RUSS FARRELL'S freckled face was thin, and the freckles seemed to stand out with uncanny sharpness against the slight pallor. His blue eyes were blazing with a curious light as he looked down from his 'plane on the awe-inspiring panorama below. The old thrill was quickening his heart as he looked from a height of five thousand feet down at the border—the wildest and most deserted section of it, too. Those towering mountains and deep-cut ravines were a part of the Big Bend—far famed in song and story as the last extensive haunt for outlaws in the United States.

Added to that realization was the thought that, down below, there was no possible chance

of landing his great Douglas airplane if that thundering four-hundred-fifty-horsepower motor went wrong. That was the old hazard of the border patrol—the patrol that was his first love. He had never dreamed of being part of it again.

Least of all, under circumstances like these—when the very air seemed permeated with the unknown but very real menace that was all the more hauntingly terrible, and hence, somehow, all the more interesting because of its vagueness.

There was Marfa ahead now, and far stretches of the great flat field which lay between the mountains that lifted their rugged heads on all sides of the little town. Marfa—forty miles from the Rio Grande, buried in the Big Bend. It had come in sight as though at the wave of a magician's wand as the Douglas, newest and best observation 'plane of the Army Air Service, hurled itself across the last peak with its twelve-cylinder Liberty roaring triumphantly.

Russ found it a relief to see the field, in the rays of the setting sun—more of a relief than it would have been ordinarily. The rangy young pilot was not himself, exactly. The past year had not been an easy one; the service he loved

had exacted much from his superb body and indomitable spirit. And he had literally dragged himself from the hospital, over the protests of the flight surgeon, to accompany his mates on the mysterious errand that had again called the pick of the service to the primeval stretches along the Rio Grande on a mission that had not been thoroughly explained to them. They did know, however, that a threat to their country lay concealed somewhere in those billowing, seemingly endless miles of chaparral—or perhaps down in the unknown reaches of old Mexico.

That was the thing which caused the still convalescent red-head's muscles to stay taut, and the lines in his lean face to seem deeper, and his whole being to remain tense and strained while he was flying his first patrol on the Big Bend.

He throttled his motor to eight hundred revolutions, and started his diving, dipping, spiraling descent to the ground. His mind was swarming with recollections of his old adventures down there, and somehow his nerves were not what they should be. It takes time to get over a wreck.

A thousand feet. Seven hundred. The wind

was almost due south. He'd land slightly on the slope, from the northeast. On westward, two miles farther on, lay Marfa, and a mile beyond that lay the cavalry post.

Russ relaxed somewhat as the landing loomed before him. That first patrol had been a strain, but now it was over.

Flying with the automatic skill of long experience, he allowed his mind to drift back to the time, three years before, when he had first seen the border. He had been the youngest flyer in the service, then, and a very green one, when he had come to the Rio Grande to serve on the patrol under the very same Captain Kennard who was to be his commanding officer now. And the years which had followed seemed almost like a dream—a whole lifetime of thrills rolled into a concentrated package.

He had had to leave the service he loved so well, for a time, because of his parents. Then he had had an opportunity to come back on active duty as a test pilot at Cook Field, up in Ohio, and that had been a year of almost continuous flying emergencies which had tested body and mind to the utmost. But he had enjoyed it, as he had enjoyed being a part of the

Army Air Service flying circus later. That circus detail had been barely completed when the first hint had come to him that he was to be one of a few flyers who might be assigned to a special patrol for some mysterious reason which no one except a few high government officials knew. Marking time impatiently at his old station, Cook Field, he had been in a bad crash, and the ordeal of the hospital had been doubly uncomfortable because of his fear that he might miss this new and mysteriously fascinating detail.

He had not missed it, but body and nerves were not yet back in perfect condition, and he realized, vaguely, that he must watch his step for a while. But he'd be all right soon. Life in the open on the border was a guaranteed recipe for health.

There was a small adobe house on that edge of the field—he'd skim over it. Marfa was more than half a mile above sea level, and the air was a bit thin. A ship landed fast, and, despite the size of the field, he wanted to come in as low as possible. He wasn't taking any chances whatever yet, not until his rangy body was under perfect control again.

He was coming in at close to a hundred miles an hour, and very low. The house was fifty yards ahead. He'd just skim it, now, and his hand reached out and cut the throttle. He'd lose speed going over the house——

The next second he felt the stick jerk back. The ship nosed up a trifle. It lost speed as an automobile does when the brakes are applied.

A furious expression leaped from his lips, to be lost unheard in the whine of the wires. The ship was practically stalled. As his free hand started to shove the throttle forward, it leaped ahead under his hand. Benson, his observer, the former pilot who was the only man in the flight whom Russ did not know, had shoved it forward.

Russ wasn't in shape to control himself, nor to think as quickly as he could under normal conditions. And his sudden hot-tempered resentment made his reactions more sluggish. Before he thought to nose down again as the ship shot over the hut, he felt the stick go forward.

Benson had taken the ship from him on the landing! The impulsive, overwrought flyer in the front seat became a seething volcano of rage.

So thoroughly resentful was he that he made

a terrible landing—he forgot the thin air, and the ship literally dropped away beneath him. It bounced six feet, at that high altitude, and to save flying speed and prevent another bounce he jammed the gun on again, and this time, slamming the throttle back, he landed smoothly on three points.

Farrell's face was flushed, now, and the light in his eyes was colder and his wide mouth set. He taxied to the line with unnecessary speed, and for a second turned and flashed a look at the stocky, slow-spoken observer whose wide gray eyes met his defiantly.

There was a tiny knot of men on the line—the gang, of course. Ridgeway, six-foot-six Slim Evans, lounging Tex MacDowell, stocky little Captain Kennard—nearly half the personnel of the carefully selected flight that had been marooned in the center of the trouble area. The realization that they had seen that botched-up landing didn't make Russ feel any better.

At the line, as the mechanics came running out, he snapped off the switches without waiting to run the gas out of his motor. He unsnapped his safety belt and flung himself from the cockpit awkwardly. The seat-pack parachute hang-

ing from his thighs caught on the cowling and nearly threw him.

As the group came toward him, he fixed his blazing eyes on square-faced, composed Benson, who got to his feet leisurely.

"The next time you touch the stick when I'm flying I'll crown you with a wrench!" Russ flared. "I felt you touch the stick on the take-off, and you took her away from me landing just now! By the mighty——"

"Then don't go trying to knock the dust off a house chimney when you're landing!" drawled Benson, leaping to the ground. His tanned face was expressionless, but his remarkably large gray eyes were level and unwavering.

"Who'll stop me?" raged Farrell. "No observer will, I'll tell you that! When I'm pilot I'm in charge of the ship, and there's nobody else got anything to say about it! Get that? If you're going to fly with me——"

"Which I wish I didn't have to," Benson told him levelly. "I know regulations as well as you do, see? But any time the health of my neck seems to require me to give assistance——"

"What?" snapped Russ. He took a step for-

ward and met his new observer's gaze with hot fury in his eyes.

"I'll do just what I did!" Benson told him slowly. "You were about to hit that house, or come so close to it that it was blankety-blank foolishness! You wouldn't have missed it by three inches——"

"Scared, eh?" interrupted Russ, vaguely aware of the fact that once again he'd lost his temper. And somehow that drove him on:

"Well, you sit tight or stay on the ground!" he fumed. "That's the worst of putting pilots that can't pass the examination on as observers, and it's just my luck to draw you! They always want to do all the flying, get scared to death at——"

"Oh, dry up, Farrell! He did just right!"

It was an unfamiliar voice, and the tall young pilot wheeled to confront a stranger standing close behind him. The oncoming airmen were only ten feet away, and as the unknown bystander shot his comment in the slurred syllables of the Southwesterner, it seemed as though sudden tension gripped them all. Captain Kennard's eyes flickered from the apparently placid

Benson to the alert stranger, and then back to Russ, whose lean body was like a streak of flame, radiating his wrath.

"Who asked your advice, who are you, and what——"

"Nobody, I'm the same, and the rest of your question probably don't amount to anything!" the stranger shot back, and his soft brown eyes held a dancing light as they met Farrell's hot blue ones.

This nonchalant unknown made a striking figure. His naturally dark olive face had been darkened still more by a deep coat of tan, and his sombrero, cocked rakishly on his head, did not completely hide thick black hair that literally shone. His face was unlined and handsome; yet there was strength in the square jaw and aggressiveness in the jutting nose and a sardonic droop to one corner of his mouth. In cowboy boots and flannel shirt garnished with a gaudy neckerchief, he seemed the epitome of the border rider in the golden days of the 'nineties.

For a moment the impulsive young pilot was literally speechless as he stared at his dashing critic. Conflicting emotions sought for expres-

sion—Russ's mind was a flaming chaos. This stranger who so casually took him to task——

"Don't even think Benson here wasn't right, and don't stoop tuh twit a man because he can't fly himself," pursued the stranger. His eyes were glowing and his whole body seemed to radiate the spirit within him. "I've heard o' you before, Farrell, and you're a great kid, but that red hair ain't got any business talkin' on an occasion like this!"

"It hasn't, eh?" snapped Farrell. "Well, it's none of your business, but I'll inform you that when I'm pilot of a ship I expect to handle it! And just who in tunket are you to——"

"Let's pipe down!" came Kennard's raucous voice, and his scarred face was serious as he walked up to the brilliant youngster he had known before as a subordinate. "You're a little overwrought, Russ. Cool off and meet Blackie Williams, here, who used to be a flyer in the Canadian Air Force and now is a ranchman who's dropped in to say hello."

For a moment the group stood like so many statues. Russ, his big body trimly outlined from boots and breeches to tight-fitting helmet, was like a man with every muscle tensed for a

spring. His eyes flamed defiantly into those of the reckless Southwesterner who had so brazenly thrown down the gauntlet to him while he was in the midst of his friends. And Williams, lounging easily, met the quivering Farrell's gaze with impudent nonchalance. The more one looked at the border man, the older that mocking, dark face seemed.

Russ was literally driven into speech. Somehow he was aware of the veiled disapproval in his friend Ridgeway's face, and in the look that Captain Kennard bent upon him. And as he darted a glance at Benson, it seemed that the older man's eyes held, deep within their placid depths, a curiously stricken expression. He was standing stoically, his square face unreadable, but those suffering eyes somehow stabbed Farrell. Yet the pilot would not yield to that stabbing.

"All right, Benson," he said deliberately, with something inside him driving him ever deeper into the mental maze in which he found himself. "Stick around as far as I'm concerned, but don't try to butt in where you haven't any business!"

Williams's lip curled.

"Don't act young!" he said, cool contempt in voice and eyes. "I back anything I say, and you can have whatever you like!"

Before Russ could collect himself, Kennard's voice cut in.

"Better go to your tent and clean up, Russ!" he snapped. "Williams, shut up!"

"I'm in your home, sir!" stated Williams equably, but there was no backing down in his bold eyes.

A thousand things were fighting for expression in Russ's mind, but as his eyes met those of bespectacled Major Evers, the flight surgeon, something like a physical shock dammed the words that would have come. For in the major's gaze there was doubtful speculation, and Russ knew what it meant. There had been considerable hesitancy about allowing him to join the flight at once, because of his physical and mental condition. He had fought fiercely for the privilege of immediate service, and had won his point because of his past record. He had never hated so much the thought of losing a few weeks. It was partially because the fiery youngster loved the border, and partially because this peculiarly mysterious, perilous ser-

vice appealed to everything in his adventurous spirit. Along with both these urges, though, there was the inarticulate love for the corps that fathered a fierce desire to do for it everything that in him lay—made the most he could give, even to his own safety, far too little to assuage the feeling within him.

Now they were all wondering—he could see it in their eyes and their faces. He was much younger than any of them.

He turned abruptly and walked away, stripping his helmet from his head. He was sick at heart, unable to control his jumping nerves as he made his report and went to his tent. He had been right, he told himself fiercely, although perhaps he'd been a little hasty with Benson. But there'd been something maddening in the older man's stoicism and stubborn holding to his point. And Williams, a stranger to them all, had had no right to do any ragging.

The captain had served five long years as a C.O. of the McMullen flight of the border patrol, starting right after the war, and he knew the possibilities of the Rio Grande country as few men did. The very fact of the short, power-

ful-looking little C.O.'s presence added to Farrell's confidence in what the future would hold forth for the flight.

The quick Texas twilight fell, and as brooding shadows swathed the mountains and blanketed the field in the valley, Russ paced the tiny floor space of his tent and hated the thought of dinner.

He was at the mess hall promptly, though, and found them all seated. Thirteen of them, with Williams. He avoided the devil-may-care rider's eyes, and with head held high stalked to his place and sat down. Directly opposite him was Benson, his shadowed eyes on his plate. The brown hair that framed the observer's square, tranquil, deeply lined face had touches of gray in it, and was in slight disarray, as seemed to be its habit.

"Ain't gonna speak to me, eh?" Williams remarked, the hint of a smile on his dark face. "No hard feelin's, eh, Farrell?"

With a real effort, Russ met the stranger's gaze squarely and said:

"O.K. with me."

The red-headed young pilot could detect

sympathy in the atmosphere, the kindly tolerance of men who felt themselves more mature than a wild kid. He resented it.

There was an instance of silence, and then Williams said in that slurred, attractively ungrammatical speech of the border country:

"So yuh don't know just why yo're here, eh, Cap'n?"

"No. And I sha'n't know until Graves arrives," the C.O. stated. "But I do know this. If one of the biggest men in the secret service is going to command the special patrol, we're not down here for any small picnic."

Somehow, competence and poise were visible in every line of Kennard's square, strong face, scarred by dozens of airplane wrecks. His short, brush-like pompadour seemed to bristle pugnaciously, and his level eyes to have the faculty of seeing through a man. Those ribbons on his blouse were not there for decorative purposes, either. The Distinguished Service Cross, the Croix de Guerre with three palms—those had been won in many a hard-fought battle over the lines in France. To Russ, as to the others, he was that rare combination—a superior officer who held respect and admiration, and along

with it one of the best friends he had in the world.

"Furthermore," put in lanky Slim Evans in his customary spacious manner, "this installing a system of searchlights like the Air Mail has doesn't point to any practice flying, exactly."

Slim was nearly six feet six inches tall, and so thin he could have hidden in a water pipe. He was possessed of oversized hands and feet, and a prodigious nose jutted forth from his thin, bony face. He had an Adam's apple that bounded up and down like a jumping jack when he talked, and owned a sense of humor which he never lost under any circumstances. Just to hear him talk, gesturing largely, was a treat. He, too, was one of the veterans of the old patrol, and one of the army's famous flyers.

"Nope," Williams answered him, as he buttered his bread. "Well, I'm sure glad you're back, and I wish I could give you some dope. I ain't heard anything, but of course I'm buried forty miles from a railroad. I imagine there's always something doing in the Big Bend, though. I heard so. That's one of the reasons I came down here."

He grinned his mocking grin as he said that.

and Russ was again aware, all at once, of a certain strength in the bold Southwesterner. He had the poise and confidence in himself of one who feared neither man nor devil.

For the rest of the meal, Williams yarned with Jimmy Jennings and Captain Kennard and the rest about the war in France. All present had had a share in it except Russ—and Benson. Russ, feeling rather envious and out of it, glanced at Benson to see how he was affected. The observer sat silent and distraught. Funny, Russ mused, how Benson had been ordered in with a crowd of border veterans—unknown, fresh from the Philippines, taken off flying on account of his eyes.

"And I've got to fly him and wait for him to mess things up by interfering while I'm pilot!" Russ pitied himself.

He got up from the table before dessert was served, and addressed big Tex MacDowell, most famous of the old border patrolmen. The Texan was a bright-eyed, drawling chap of thirty who could fly as few men in the country could.

"I'll take over the O.D. right now, Tex," he said.

MacDowell nodded.

"All right," he drawled. "I'll be over and sign up right after I'm well victualed."

Russ went out and over to headquarters. It being their first official day on the border, things were still somewhat disorganized, and the guard detail, including himself as new Officer of the Day, had not been posted until just before dinner.

After posting his guard around the hangars, he walked around the quiet airdrome aimlessly. There was a perpetual whispering in the mesquite which hemmed in the field, as though all the mystery of the border country were impregnating the night air. Somehow the vastness of this country was more impressive at night, and to the unhappy Farrell those glowing stars in the sky seemed to be winking down at undreamed of things hidden within the thousands of miles of primeval wilderness that reached to the edges of the post as though to strangle it.

"Farrell!"

It was Williams's deep voice, and the flyer wheeled to confront a tall, shadowy figure. The glowing tip of a cigarette fleetingly lit up the dark face.

"Shake?" Williams queried briefly. "I'm right sorry things come up as they did. We were both wrong. How about it?"

Perhaps because the speaker's face was hidden in the darkness, or because there was a curious timbre in the bass voice, the simple words were curiously affecting. Russ was aware of relief and a peculiar interest in the stranger. He gave him his hand.

"You're right," he said, a slight choke in his voice.

"I'm leavin' for town to get my pony and strike out for the ranch," Williams said equably. "Now I feel better. So long. See you pronto. *Adios!*"

And he was gone. As he faded into the night, Russ looked after him, and thought again of Benson. Somehow the look in the observer's eyes haunted him—that expression which was like that of a dumbly suffering beast which could not voice its hurt. He knew he ought to go to him.

"Officer of the Day! Russ!"

It was Kennard's voice, bellowing from headquarters steps. As Russ broke into a run, he could hear the little C.O.'s stentorian tones shouting:

"Get Sergeant Fuller and five ships out! Round up the officers! Quick!"

Suddenly Farrell's heart was beating wildly as he tore for the lighted office. From somewhere along the border a call for help had come. The unknown things they were there to fight had come into the open, perhaps——

"Call from Ranger Young, down at Caralia!" Kennard snapped. "Needs every available ship, he said, before he was cut off! Leaving you in charge here, of course. Won't take us long. We can land there—but, by the mighty, I wish the lights were working!"

Williams was there, his dark eyes blazing like stars as, with the eager, quivering, disappointed Farrell, he watched the great 'planes rushed from the hangars under the glare of the landing searchlights which flooded the field; saw the helmeted flyers gather, and heard the motors roar into their songs like beasts of the night in full cry on the trail. One by one they sped across the field, to gather above the airdrome and then hurtle off across the peaks with their exhaust flames trailing behind like red banners of warning.

"Sure got the law all hooked up, haven't

yuh?" Williams breathed as the last ship disappeared behind the mountains.

Russ, distraught and unhappy because he was not in that cavalcade, nodded morosely. He wished he could control that nervous trembling.

"Got cavalry, immigration men, customs, rangers, sheriffs—everybody—all tied into this. In a few days things'll be still tighter, when we get going. What we're after we won't know until Graves gets here——"

"Officer of the Day!"

It was the sergeant of the guard, and his voice rang through the night and echoed eerily from the mountain sides. The mechanics, still gathered around the lighted hangars, seemed to turn to stone, and Farrell's heart leaped within him. Had another call flashed from the recesses of the Big Bend?

He found himself running toward headquarters, directly across the southwest corner of the airdrome. Williams was beside him, running with the awkwardness of an accustomed rider.

Major Evers was inside, hanging up the 'phone, and Benson was on the porch. The observer was like a piece of ice, but his eyes were

"Call from the Wembley ranch house, about forty miles west, ten miles from the river," Major Evers told Russ steadily. "Ranger Thomas. Says that, ten miles west and going north is a bunch he's sure are smugglers. He says he can handle them if a ship can stand guard with its guns from the air. They're close to Jackson Cañon."

His keen old eyes were bent on the white-faced Farrell as he spoke in his even phrases. Farrell was literally aflame—fired with the same self-forgetful ardor that had made him one of the famous flyers of the service.

"You'll have to stand O.D. for me," he burst forth. "I'll get off at once. But I don't know just where that is—I'm new to this section of the border."

"Listen!" interjected Williams, and his body seemed to radiate fierce delight in the prospect ahead. "That's my country. Put me in the back seat with Benson, here, and I'll show you right where it is—how to make a bee line for the place. An extra man may be handy, likewise!"

It didn't take a second for Farrell to nod his assent. Without a word, Benson followed him as he tore off to his tent, shouting orders as he ran.

Two minutes later the field was flooded with light again, Russ was buckling on his seat-pack parachute, and Sergeant Fuller was warming the Liberty as the wheels of the Douglas strained against their blocks.

When Russ got in, Benson and Williams, the latter without a parachute, were standing in the rear seat, the adjustable observer's belt around them both. The pilot's experienced eyes swept the instrument board—oil pressure, air pressure, temperature, charging rate, r.p.m. In a trice he had read the story of the needles, and had nodded to the white-faced mechanics, who were almost as excited as he was.

He could take off from where the ship was standing. He darted a quick look at the men behind him. Williams's eyes glowed like a cat's, and he grinned a saturnine, indomitable grin with a hint of boyishness in it. Benson's square face seemed older—and there was a look in his eyes that made Farrell's flesh creep, somehow. But the observer merely nodded his readiness, and Russ, a man with but one thought, had no time for speculation.

An instant later, the Douglas was hurtling across the hard-packed sand as the pilot threw

his weight against the stick and brought the nose level. One circle of the field to get altitude enough to start over the mountains, and then he followed Williams's pointing figure, southwest toward the river.

The state of his nerves could be seen in the nervous trembling of his feet on the rudder bar and the glare in his blue eyes as they watched the needles ceaselessly. Continuous stretches of jagged cliffs and thick mesquite lay hidden in the darkness below, and their lives were staked against the unbroken rhythm of the Liberty. But for the moment these were minor details to the flyer, who always forgot himself and his own safety when the quick, deadly emergencies of the Air Service came and there was no doubt where his duty lay.

They'd been hurtling on for nearly fifteen minutes. They were two thousand feet high and twenty miles along on their way above the opaque blackness below. Not a light down there, Russ reflected. It hadn't taken long for the patrol to be called into action—maybe that night would see the solution of whatever it was that had caused Washington to mobilize the forces of the law——

A terrific blow hit him in the back.

Why, he did not know, but it must have been the sixth sense of his kind that caused his hand to drop to the Colt at his side as he turned.

And never to his dying day would he forget what he saw. The barrel of a gun was dimly discernible, the muzzle poked into the side of Benson as Williams held it there. The latter's face was that of some cruel, mocking devil of the night as his other arm swept round. A heavy wrench was in it, and before Russ could take in the full horror of the tableau, the tool had hit Benson a terrific blow, and the drawn-faced observer had slumped like a sack of meal.

Farrell's belt had kept him from drawing his gun, but, as the blow fell, he unsnapped the belt. His gun was half out of his holster as he cringed forward to avoid what he was sure was coming.

He avoided it partially, but not entirely. A glancing blow, almost on his neck, dazed him, and he threw himself forward toward the floor. His body hit the stick. Instinctively, he carried out a plan that came to him without conscious thought. He pretended complete unconsciousness, and twisted his body so that his gaze, be-

low supposedly closed lids, could include the rear cockpit. Dizzy and dazed and stunned with surprise as he was, he nevertheless could see the gun trained on him and that dark face, triumphant now, behind it.

He dared not move as he saw Benson's unconscious body slump over the cowling as the belt was released. The gun was still trained on Russ when he saw Williams's hand reach for the ripcord ring of the unconscious observer's chute. An instant later the Westerner jerked the ring, and the pilot chute opened. Benson was whisked into midair—and Russ could see him no more.

The shock of that brought back his faculties —and as so frequently happened in times of greatest stress, they seemed to be transcendently clear. It was as though everything were suddenly simple and comprehensible, and Farrell's brain capable of plotting out a plan without his own volition.

His body was against the stick, and he felt it tug backward. The two-ton Douglas, bigger and heavier and stronger than the old De Havilands, was in a gradual dive that was growing steeper every second. The wires were shrieking madly

as the 'plane hurtled toward the deadly earth below, and Williams, almost out of sight of Russ now, held the gun with one hand and strove to pull it out with the other.

The young pilot, careless of what the future held for him, knew what he must do. There in that back seat lay the man who must not be allowed to escape at any cost.

Russ did not know how high the falling ship was above the earth, but he did know that it could never be rescued from that terrible dive earthward so long as his body was wedged against the stick.

So, with faculties numb as he awaited the crash that he felt must come any second, he lay motionless. Sooner or later, Williams must lean forward and lift him out of the way if he were to save his own life. Perhaps he'd shoot first—or maybe wait too long to save them. At best, the glorious gamble might lose in the struggle which would come. But Russ, rushing toward destruction above the vast reaches of the Big Bend, facing he knew not what, was no longer just a hot-headed boyish flyer. He was a man to whom personal safety meant little—to whom the

task he must try to perform was the thing of importance.

With one half of his brain aware of the shrieking hell of tortured wires and vibrating ship and of the unseen ground reaching hungrily to engulf him, there seemed to be another part of his consciousness that was methodically figuring out what had happened. That first call for ships had been a decoy call by Williams's confederate, designed to leave but one ship at the field. The second, likewise, was a decoy call —and how cleverly it had been done! And Williams—who was he? Certainly as daring an outlaw as ever trusted himself in the midst of his enemies—and outwitted them! In Williams, almost surely, lay the solution of the patrol's problem.

Russ's ears were ringing as he dared a look upward. Surely the ground was perilously close.

Williams was leaning forward from the rear cockpit!

And his gun had disappeared! Then he was sure Russ was unconscious. And the fact that he had not killed Benson meant that he shrank from murder. To be sure, the outlaw had drop-

ped the observer in a 'chute, unconscious above that deadly mountain region. Yet he had stayed the shot that would have meant sure death. And now, for a moment, he was leaning forward, off guard.

Like a flash Farrell's gun was in his hand and he straightened up. Williams's eyes were pools of red flame as the gun covered him. In that terrible dive, Russ dared another instant, and the barrel of the gun swept round like a streak of lightning and crashed to the outlaw's temple.

Russ knew that Williams must be out—the chances were that his skull was fractured. He had to chance it as he settled down to ease the stick back. Less than five hundred feet from the ground—and it seemed that the controls must break.

But duralumin control bars instead of wires, and metal construction were different from the frail De Havilands of a bygone day. Tugging with all his strength, he handled the big ship. In a gradual arc the ship swept out, and just as the undercarriage seemed destined to drag through the boughs of the scrubby mesquite the Douglas was level once more.

Watching over his shoulder, gun ready, Russ got a thousand feet high, and then, holding the stick with one hand, he dared to lean backward and look into the rear cockpit. Williams was crumpled in the seat—what a miracle it was that he, too, had not jammed the stick. But Russ had knocked him backward to prevent that very thing.

Russ flew now with his head turned constantly, and his gun ready, but Williams did not move and the blood on his face was mute evidence of the force of the blow which had felled him. And Russ forgot him, almost, as he thought of Benson. Benson had dared to warn him while Williams's gun was pressed against him—had risked his life gloriously to give one of them a chance to escape.

There were hot tears in the young pilot's eyes as he flew back, scanning the ground for the signal he hardly dared hope to see.

But there it was! Benson was alive, and conscious, down there in the wilderness. Three flashes from a pocket searchlight—repeated over and over. That was the signal arranged in case of a forced 'chute jump at night, and Russ answered it happily as his eyes took in the exact

location, and he sent his ship roaring on its short trip homeward.

The searchlights made a well of light in the valley, and five dark shapes were on the line. The other ships were back.

In sweeping spirals he came down and landed, and had cut his switches almost before the Douglas stopped rolling. The other flyers were around it as he leaped to the ground, and told them his story in terse phrases.

"You're exactly right," barked Kennard disgustedly. "That call was a fake. Isn't this Williams a darb? As soon as the major brings him to, we'll find out whether he wanted to steal a ship for aërial smuggling, or to sell in Mexico."

"Say," put in Ridgeway mournfully, and yet with a half-chuckle in his voice, too. "Isn't this border getting tough?"

"Well, we'll see what one tough guy's up to," grated Kennard—but, after all, they didn't find out much.

When Williams came to, he raised himself on his cot and bowed mockingly to Russ.

"Salutations," he stated easily. "You shore took a chance—and won. Some gambler, I'll say. Now, don't ask me, any of yuh, why I

wanted that ship. Put me in jail and let it go at that. I'll never tell anything. Use your imagination. A ship's worth money, ain't it? Shore."

And, unembarrassed and seemingly not downcast, he was taken to Marfa later, and a day afterward to San Antonio—and not a word did he ever say except to hand quizzical compliments to the flyers. He'd just tried to steal a fifteen-thousand-dollar ship, for purposes presumably criminal.

As the car bearing him and his guards rolled out of the airdrome, Fred Ridgeway's dark, saturnine face held a drooping, one-sided smile, and his eyes were quizzical. Ridgeway had taught Russ to fly when the youngster was a cadet who had never been off the ground. Since then, the fates had willed it that pupil and teacher be stationed, many times, on the same post, and Ridgeway had watched his protégé gain in skill and fame with almost every hundred hours of flying which he put behind him. It always seemed peculiarly humorous, to Russ, to remember that his friend Fred had once been an officer over him, who had flayed him, coaxed him, disciplined him, almost forced him to learn to fly.

"That bird Williams," Ridgeway said at length, "strikes me as considerable of a boy. If I was the keeper of the jailhouse, I believe I'd watch him close."

"Me too," agreed Russ. "He's got more unadulterated nerve——"

"And a brand of humorous guts which is remarkable," Slim Evans finished for him. "I wonder if he's hooked up with this gang—and if so, whether they've got many more of the same calibre?"

"If they have, Williams may not stay in jail long," stated Kennard. "They'll spring him, somehow."

It was unusual, but at that instant Russ got what he expressed as "a leaping, crawling hunch" that some day he'd run into Blackie Williams again.

"That's a crazy idea," he told himself. "At that, I'd enjoy knowing him better."

It was nearly ten o'clock the next morning when Benson, miraculously unhurt, was brought back to camp. He had regained consciousness in time to slip his 'chute into a small clearing.

Russ had been doing a great deal of heavy and somewhat shamed thinking between the

times of Williams's departure and Benson's arrival. He found Benson in his tent. The young pilot stretched out his hand as he met the tranquil gaze of the thirty-year-old observer who had learned self-control and gentle tolerance.

"I—just wanted to say you did a wonderful thing up there, Benson," Russ said, not too steadily. "And I'm ashamed—about the other thing. I was a fool to come so close to that house with any passenger, and a cad to act the way I did. I——"

"That's all right, Russ," Benson told him quietly, his eyes warm and glowing. "You'd have missed it all right, and I wasn't—entirely right. But it's hard for an ex-pilot to ride, day after day, with someone else . . ."

His voice faded with the last words, and in the suffering that the sensitive Russ sensed in it there was a reason the red-headed flyer could understand. The pride of a pilot in handling his ship is second to no satisfaction in the world—and that had been denied Benson. Moreover, as Russ himself realized, the strain of entrusting one's self to another on hazardous flying duty is something torturing to any veteran pilot.

"I'm glad we got together," Benson went on,

and his smile seemed to radiate an inner light. "We've got tough times ahead, I guess, and this is a small outfit where disagreements mean more than usual. I guess we understand each other."

Suddenly the peace of the Texas night seemed to fill the impulsive youngster's being. He relaxed into a happiness he had not known for weeks. It was as though he foresaw the start of a friendship that was to mean more to him than any thrills that the border might hold.

CHAPTER II

THE ROUND-UP ON THE RIO GRANDE

RUSS was on the line three days later when the De Haviland landed, because he knew who would be in it.

As Mr. Graves stepped out, he extended his hand to the big, red-headed young pilot, and his remarkable gray eyes glowed warmly. "How do you do, Farrell? So we're working together again, are we?" he asked with a smile, and Humphreys, his pilot, looked on with an amazed expression on his dark, rather sullen face.

"Fine, sir," Russ answered, and meant it for an answer to both questions.

Russ greatly liked and admired the stocky, gray-haired secret service agent. He had come into contact with him the year before at Cook Field. And there he had seen him at work. Since then he had heard a thousand tales of the man

who was high in the councils of the government, and who was the center of those secret forces all over the world which constantly fed their information into the huge office in Washington where Graves weighed and planned and directed—when he wasn't out on some high mission like this one on the border.

"I want to talk to the entire flight at once," he told Captain Kennard tersely, and together they walked toward headquarters.

Humphreys, the Donovan Field pilot who had been assigned to carry Graves along the border, fell into step beside Farrell.

"So you're Farrell, eh?" he inquired in his rasping voice. "Well, well, one of the throne gang, eh? How do you do it? The Chief's favorite son!"

Russ could not tell whether Humphreys was being nasty, or just humorous; so he held his tongue.

"How do you work it?" Humphreys went on. "Coming back in the army and getting assigned right away to Cook Field as a test pilot? Skimming all the cream, aren't you? Pretty punk, when they pass over those who've been flying right along and take a kid on for the big stuff!"

There was more of the same sort before they reached headquarters, but Russ clamped his lips together and let Humphreys talk. Russ was learning to control himself. He didn't like this black-haired Donovan Field man, but he wasn't going to show it.

"He's one of those birds who're jealous of anyone else's success," Russ told himself. "I wonder what Graves has got to say?"

That was what the whole flight wondered. In Graves's hands, they knew, rested the direction of the patrol.

Graves was ready to talk to the group by the time Russ reached the Captain's office. The secret service man was standing beside the desk. Gray-headed and square-jawed, dressed immaculately now that his flying coveralls had been removed, he looked like a broad-browed, kindly gentleman of distinguished position. But Russ knew him not only as that, but also as a pitiless, uncannily successful man-hunter—when Graves's profile leaped into view, the luminous-eyed, gray-haired gentleman turned into a jutting-nosed, thin-lipped, keenly aggressive hound of justice.

As always, Graves's words to the flyers were

forthright and incisive—each one like a separate spike driven into the verbal structure he was building. And Russ, even more eager than the rest, listened tensely to the unhurried announcements of the man who was to lead them.

"So, gentlemen," Graves summed up, "it was decided that I should do as I have done once before—that I should assume charge of the border patrol, to make this round-up more certain. In fact, to accomplish it at all. Literally thousands of aliens are being dumped on this country, regardless of the restrictions of the immigration law. And the United States simply cannot properly absorb any more than the regular quota.

"Most of the aliens are being smuggled across the southern border, and distributed with mysterious efficiency all through the West and Middle West. And the smuggling is being done by some big syndicate operating from a base in Mexico. Working with ground forces alone, we've been utterly unable to cope with this fifteen-hundred-mile border. We've been helpless against the vast organization and daring operations which have been making monkeys out of the forces of the law.

"That's the reason, gentlemen, why the border patrol is in effect again; why you're here under my direction; why you have the most modern equipment, in ships and guns, available, and the best flyers, picked men; and why the border has been equipped with the Air Mail searchlight system, for night flying, so that the patrols may go on day and night until we round up the smugglers.

"The gang is big, powerful, daring, and, naturally, unscrupulous. You're in for some thrills, because this flight, in the center of the Big Bend, has the most important section, as well as the most wild and deserted territory, along the border.

"You've had a sample already. There is no question in my mind that Williams is an employee—doubtless one of the most important employees—of the organization. The speed with which they struck, and the daring of the scheme, will give you an idea of what you are up against. They have the audacity to carry the fight to us, you observe.

"Great pressure will be exerted on Williams, of course, in an endeavor to make him talk. The chances are against success, I believe. Wil-

liams is not the type of man, evidently, to 'squeal' to save himself. However, we'll try. If we do succeed, we will not be working completely in the dark, as we are now."

He had not gone into detail concerning what information Federal men had unearthed thus far, but his last statement indicated that that information was meager. But every man there knew that in the genius of this gray-headed servant of the government lay their principal hope for success in the duty to which they had been assigned.

Humphreys's face had worn a covert sneer, Russ had noticed, when Graves had called the patrolmen "picked men." "Because he wasn't picked for it, I suppose!" thought Farrell.

Graves had finished—every detail had been covered—and within a half hour he and Humphreys had taken off for El Paso. At nine-thirty, to be exact. When Graves was on business bent, neither word nor motion was wasted until he reached the goal he sought.

He left behind him a dozen vastly contented pilots and observers with important and perilous work ahead of them—and of them all none

was so happy as Russ. The freckled-faced youngster was on the *qui vive,* his lean face glowing and his blue eyes crackling with anticipation as he thought of the battles ahead. There was no place like the border, after all.

That is, he felt that way until noon. And from noon on, all joy in the future had been submerged by the deadly emergency of the present.

For at one o'clock the flight knew that Humphreys and Graves had not reached El Paso on time—and now, at four o'clock, it seemed that a black shadow had reached down and engulfed the airdrome and all who dwelt thereon.

Russ, and the three other airmen who were sitting in the shade of a hangar, were silent. The loss of Graves would be irreparable. They hated to think of what might happen without him—of what might have happened to that gallant, gray-haired fighter in mufti. If Graves——

Russ got to his feet abruptly. It seemed to him that he could not wait until it was his turn to go out on scouting duty again. He had to have some outlet for the nervousness which gripped him.

"Gosh!" he exploded suddenly. "They start

off at nine-thirty, and this Humphreys is supposed to know the border. He announces that he's going to fly a bee line to El Paso. He's supposed to be a good pilot——"

"Admits it himself in a loud voice," interjected dark-haired, gray-eyed Ridgeway.

Russ nodded as he strode up and down.

"Sure," he agreed. "But, just the same, they didn't get to El Paso. There's been no storm to force them off their course. They simply couldn't get lost—all they had to do was fly due south for a few minutes, hit the Rio Grande, and follow it right into El Paso."

"Well?" inquired Benson.

"Well," Russ pointed out for the hundredth time, "the only reason for their not getting at least to Fort Bliss would be a forced landing, wouldn't it? And we've flown over every foot of the country they would have landed in—and there's not even a trace of a wreck!"

Silence fell over the worried group. They knew all that. And it just wasn't natural, that was all. How could a big observation 'plane, with a thousand-pound Liberty motor in it, simply disappear from the face of the earth? A wreck? On the border patrol, of course, crashes

were inevitable, for there was nothing to land on but limitless mesquite and cañon-split mountains. But no crack-up—not even one in which the ship caught fire—could remove all traces of that motor and ship from the sight of airmen above.

Young Jimmy Jennings's handsome, clean-cut face was old, and there was tragedy in his luminous dark eyes as he said musingly:

"There you are. As far as we can see, they've been swallowed up in thin air. And yet there's just a chance that we've missed 'em, and that they're lying out there in the Big Bend, hurt and hard-up for help and——"

"No! It can't be!" Farrell interrupted fiercely, his blue eyes glittering with the strain. "From twenty miles north of their course right down to the river we've covered every inch, and you know it! And Graves was anxious to get there as quickly as possible; so they wouldn't have played around! And there aren't any traces of 'em anywhere! Talk about your mysteries—and it's Graves!"

There was no doubt about the fact that there was something very, very unusual about the situation. A two-ton airplane doesn't disintegrate

into nothing—just vanish. And because Graves had been a passenger, the situation took on an aspect of chilling menace. Where on earth could the two men—or their bodies—be? And who, or what, was behind this threatening mystery?

Once again there was silence. No one felt like talking. Russ paced up and down the small patch of shade, his eyes resting absently on the two great 'planes that were awaiting the return of two of the men now on patrol. New ships went out every hour and a half—and there were always five in the air, searching ceaselessly for some trace of the vanished men.

Farrell's freckled face was set and a bit paler than usual as he thought back over events since the time Graves had arrived. He hated to suspect Humphreys, and yet——

His red head snapped back as he heard a familiar roar that grew louder and louder. In a second two 'planes hurtled into view across the peaks and came spiraling down for a landing. And as the mechanics leaped for the two 'planes on the line, a sudden, half-confused thought rose in Russ's mind. For hours he'd been groping for a possible explanation of the lost 'plane's com-

plete disappearance—now, when he hadn't been thinking along that line, the glimmering of an idea brightened in his brain.

It was a relief to rush for his helmet and goggles, and to climb in the cockpit and try out the bellowing twelve-cylinder Liberty with careful hand. He was about to have some action—and it was better than sitting around and worrying and going crazy trying to explain the unexplainable.

Tex MacDowell and gangling Slim Evans were the pilots returning, and they shook their heads mutely. No news.

Russ turned and looked at Benson. Somehow, it settled the fiery young pilot's nerves to have the placid, kindly, unruffled observer around. A warm, undemonstrative friendship had developed overnight between the mature veteran and the boyish pilot—and Benson already meant a great deal to Russ in many ways. He was a balance wheel, for one thing.

Benson nodded and smiled his slow smile. At Farrell's nod the mechanics pulled the blocks from the wheels, and the next second Russ's hand had eased the throttle all the way ahead. The great ship, equipped with every modern

device, from machine guns to landing lights set in the wings, roared across the hard-packed sand and took the air as Russ inched back on the stick. A few circles of the field, and it had altitude enough to make its way across the mountains, and a moment later, the airdrome lost to sight, Farrell's crackling blue eyes were peering ahead on the limitless vista of thick chaparral which clothed alike majestic slopes and level ground, gashed here and there by deep-cut ravines.

He was bound for a certain spot, fifty miles west. He strained forward in his seat, as though to help the ship on its way. He forgot the grim menace of the terrain below, and the perils of a forced landing never entered his head.

Suddenly it had seemed that there was only one conceivable explanation for the disappearance of the two men—and he dared not even whisper it to anyone else until he was sure.

"I wonder if I've thought of this just because I don't like Humphreys?" he questioned himself, as the Douglas reeled off the miles at the rate of two a minute.

But he could not believe that his resentment

of Humphreys' razzing was back of the suspicion that had come to him.

His wide mouth thinned a trifle as his eyes scanned the ground. Probably he was a darn fool—but this idea held the only solution he could see, and whether or not he was goofy, he was going to follow the thing through.

There was his spot, now. A long, narrow cleared spot in the mesquite. Alongside it a deserted, crumbling cabin. There were a few stumps in the clearing, and it was very narrow, but a landing was possible. And it was the only landing space within ten miles of the air line between Marfa and El Paso.

He turned to Benson, pointed down, and signaled his intention of landing. Benson showed neither surprise nor fear. That was just like the good old boy. Since the little run-in they'd had the first day on the border, Benson had been the perfect observer. And Russ had tried hard to be the perfect pilot from an observer's point of view.

It was a difficult landing. East of the cleared space the mesquite was very thin, and Russ got low enough to glide through this thin chaparral, banking slightly to get between the trees. That

enabled him to land on the very edge of the clearing, and prevented the danger of a crack-up due to overrunning.

He let the motor idle and climbed out. Benson was right behind him.

"Why?" queried Benson easily.

"This is the only place they could land safely if they took an air line, as they were going to," Russ returned. "And I've got a crazy idea—— By golly! Look at this!"

Suddenly, he was a living flame as he dashed over to a mark in the sand, ten feet away.

"Look, Ben! If those aren't wheel tracks and this a tailskid track, I'm the Queen of the May!"

Benson removed his helmet and scratched his gray-brown hair. His eyes held a curious flicker as he looked from the ground to Russ.

"You're right," he said in his gentle way. "What do you think?"

"Let's see," flashed Russ. "Look over the ground and see if you spot anything extraordinary—such as a place where some digging's been done."

They cast over the ground like beagles. And from the scrubby trees on the northern edge, close to the ruined cabin, Benson shouted:

"Here's a heap that looks new!"

Russ bounded over to him. There it was—the sand heaped up in a rounded pile, just under the trees bounding the clearing.

"Let's dig!" Russ said steadily, but suddenly his face was very pale and the freckles very prominent.

He dreaded beyond measure what they might find. He hadn't thought of that——

With sticks they pawed away at the sand like dogs digging for a bone. In less than a minute Farrell's stake hit something hard. A half-minute of taut expectation as they worked frantically—and the edge of a blackened Liberty motor came into view.

The two flyers looked at each other, and Benson's face seemed more deeply lined and his eyes suddenly cold and bleak. Russ was barely able to control his jumping nerves.

Without a word, they went back to work. And in ten minutes the heap was laid bare. Russ, unable to contain himself any longer, tore away at the twisted wire and blackened metal to get to the bottom.

"No bones!" he yelled exultantly. "No trace of any human being here, Ben!"

"You don't suppose they were buried—separately?" queried Benson.

For a second, the impulsive Russ's leaping sense of relief vanished.

"Maybe," he said thoughtfully. "But there's no other sign of a hole, and it seemed natural that, under the circumstances, they'd cover everything at once."

"How did you figure it, and what do you think now, Russ?" Benson asked quietly, but Russ had never seen his soft eyes with that hard sheen in them before.

"I figured it was just plain impossible for that ship to disappear by itself!" Russ said in a rush of words. "And I got to thinking. The disappearance must be deliberate, and planned. Graves wouldn't do it. It couldn't be done by flying the ship off, because Graves wouldn't allow it—he was in the back seat with a gun, and has flown so much he'd shoot before letting anybody take him way off course."

"You're insinuating that Humphreys was in a plot to get rid of Graves?"

"Kidnap him, anyway!" Russ said steadily. "And I figured that Humphreys, if he's been bribed by this bunch we're fighting, would want

to cover his tracks if he could. So if Humphreys told his confederates to be here, and he faked a forced landing here—why, then said bunch could get 'em both, see? Kidnap, supposedly, Humphreys as well as Graves, or kill Graves and leave Humphreys alive. Then they could burn the ship and bury it so that we couldn't find out a thing. I just figured out a wild chance of something like that, and that this would be the place where it'd be pulled."

"I see," Benson said slowly. "But, Russ, I don't believe they've killed Graves. If they'd wanted to do that, it could have been done more easily. Besides, would they kill a valuable man and lay themselves liable to a lot of trouble just as a threat to the rest of us? Wouldn't they figure that that's about all it would be—that another good man would take Graves's place, and they'd have murder on their hands for no reason? I don't believe Graves is dead. But, gosh, Russ, it certainly looks as if Humphreys had turned traitor and——"

"Sure!" Russ burst forth. "A man can't believe, can he, that a real forced landing brought 'em down here, and that a bunch of thugs just happened to be here and grabbed 'em? Some-

body had to be in on it, and it's either Humphreys or Graves! And that means that they bribed Humphreys, when they found he was to be Graves's pilot, just to get Graves, for some reason!"

"Well, let's hustle back," suggested Benson.

They did, but the return trip to the airdrome seemed to Russ to take an eternity. Somehow, his confidence that Graves was still alive began to waver in spite of him. The Big Bend held within its fastnesses dozens of outlaws who had fled from civilization. No telling who might have seen the 'plane land, and roved over and killed both men for their money and watches, and buried the remains of both ship and passengers. Or, if Humphreys had deliberately landed Graves in the midst of his enemies, they might have killed him.

Burying the 'plane—they had evidently set fire to it and then covered it—meant that the unknown outlaws knew that a search would be made when no radioed message from El Paso came announcing their safe arrival. That sounded as though Humphreys were in the conspiracy, too. He'd know about that detail.

About ten seconds after he had landed,

Messrs. Slim Evans and Tex MacDowell and their observers, together with every enlisted man on the field, were told the story. As the ships came in, two by two, excitement grew and the thing was talked over endlessly. Finally, when the last ship had landed and all brains were reeling from continuous conversation regarding the situation, stocky little Captain Kennard ran his fingers through his spike-like pompadour and summed things up:

"Looks bad for Humphreys. It isn't within reason that the arm of coincidence is as long as that. I don't believe they're dead. But all we can do is tend to our knitting and wait."

The newspapers didn't get hold of it, but from El Paso to McMullen and from Donovan Field to Washington the news was flashed to the government authorities. And as the night and the day following dragged their weary hours by, hope went glimmering. If Graves weren't dead, he was being held prisoner, and the ceaseless search of both ground parties and airmen, over every foot of territory and in every town, was unavailing.

Then, late in the afternoon, when the weary border patrolmen were lounging on the steps

of headquarters, the mail orderly returned from Marfa with the letter sack. And a moment thereafter Captain Kennard, his gray eyes blazing, was in the doorway.

"Listen!" he bellowed raucously. "They're alive, in Mexico, and—but listen to this!"

Russ was on his feet, his big body tense and his heart thumping like some huge engine, as Captain Kennard read slowly:

"This is mailed from Marfa by one who will be over the border by the time it is received.

"Mr. Graves and Lieutenant Humphreys are alive, somewhere in Mexico, and will be released upon payment of a ransom of $25,000, United States money, under the following conditions:

"To-morrow morning, at seven o'clock, Lieutenant Russell Farrell will take off in an airplane. The guns must be removed, or unloaded. He will fly due south to the Rio Grande, and then westward along it, until he sees, upon the Mexican side of the river, a big cross in the center of a field suitable to land in. The cross will be made of crossed sticks of wood.

"He will, of course, be carrying the $25,000 in cash. He will land, and pick up our representative there. This representative will assure himself that the guns, if any, are unloaded and that no ammunition is available. He will then direct Lieutenant Farrell's flying to a spot in Mexico that is suitable for a landing. There, upon payment of the ransom, the two prisoners will be released and can be flown back to the States.

"No other ships can be in the air at any time. There must be no radio attachment on Farrell's ship. Should there be any false moves whatever, in any way whatsoever, the two prisoners will be disposed of for good. Any other ship in the air will be reason enough for cancelling all plans.

"You have until dark to-morrow, Wednesday, to ransom the prisoners."

"There you are!" stated Kennard, his eyes pools of fire. "And they picked Russ by name——"

"Probably because the rest of us have been on the border a long time, and Russ only a little while," suggested Jimmy Jennings.

Russ, who had been equally puzzled, immediately agreed. Tex MacDowell and Slim Evans and Jimmy Jennings and the rest had widespread reputations for nervy work along the Rio Grande—he was an unknown quantity. It wasn't complimentary for the bandits to consider him the safest bet—but he was glad they had!

"The mischief of it is," barked Kennard, "that that money can never in the world be got from the government in time. It's an old situation. Years ago, when Davidson and Peters were captured by bandits, local men had to raise the dough and be reimbursed by the government

later. I'm off for Marfa right now, to see what I can do!"

He could do plenty. The Texans came to the rescue of the airmen without a quibble—cattlemen, merchants, bankers, and professional men alike. Before the newspapers of the country knew what was going on, a mass meeting in Marfa had pledged the $25,000, and at midnight the banks were opened especially to supply the cash.

And at six o'clock the next morning a red-headed young pilot who hadn't slept a wink was making some peculiar preparations. Those bandits down there, possibly, were in the thick of the lawless, audacious activities along the border—and far be it from Russ Farrell to let them get away, if there was any help for it. But his heart sank as he remembered that any false move might mean the death of Graves—and Humphreys. Not that the latter meant so much. Russ was still of the opinion, as were the other flyers, that the dark-faced, sneering, unpopular pilot was a part of the conspiracy, and that his captivity was merely a fake for which he would be well paid.

At seven-thirty, Russ was sending his Doug-

las along the twisting, turning Rio Grande, and halfway between Marfa and El Paso he caught his breath as he saw the signal, squarely in the center of a long, narrow field beside the river.

As he landed, a tall, bow-legged man appeared from the chaparral. There was not a house within miles.

Russ surveyed the stranger with consuming interest. Long, thin horse-face, garnished by a scar on the right cheek, and lightened by narrow, light green eyes. No hat; brown hair tousled and thick. The bony countenance, with its long nose and thin mouth, was hard, but in the quirk of the lips and a peculiar light in the narrow eyes there lurked a sort of sardonic humor.

"Hello," the man said casually. "We'll look her over. Got the money?"

Russ nodded.

The stranger, dressed in leather chaps and dirty flannel shirt, went over the ship expertly, looking at the guns and the radio set, and searching for ammunition.

"Where's the dough?" he inquired pleasantly, and Russ answered steadily:

"You'll see that when I see the prisoners."

"Good," said horse-face pleasantly, "let's go. All-metal prop, I see."

"And I can see," Russ thought swiftly, "that this fellow knows ships. I wonder——"

They were off, and the bandit's finger was pointing southwestward. There had been a moment of heart-failure when he had patted Russ's pockets and waist for a gun. Now that the ordeal was over, Russ's eyes were blazing with excited anticipation, and his big body was a mass of steel springs which were hard to keep in control.

He hadn't been flying more than five minutes above the rugged, mesquite-covered hills of old Mexico when there appeared a clearing, on the slope of a mountain, close by a rocky gorge that ran between two low hills. Several of the stumps that dotted it gleamed whitely, as though newly cut.

As Russ got above it, he saw, under the trees at the side of it, several men. He looked around just as his passenger gripped him, nodded, and pointed down. And at that exact moment the motor sputtered weakly, and died.

For a second, Russ was almost panic-stricken.

Then, in a mighty wave of comprehension, he felt positive that the "wondering" which he and the flight had been doing had been well founded. They had wondered, among other things, why the bandits had specified a ship, when a ship would get back to the States very quickly and organize pursuit before they had an hour's start. Now he was sure. These bandits planned to steal the ship, too—and the man in the back seat had turned off the gas, probably, so that Russ would figure the motor had gone bad. The bandits could cover their real intentions by forcing the flyers to start on foot for the border, and instruct them, perhaps, to come back after their ship.

For the next two minutes Farrell's hands were full. He didn't attempt to start the motor—he wanted his passenger to think he had been taken in by the trick. But a landing on that mountain side with a dead motor meant perfect judgment of speed and distance—which same judgment Russ had. Flying had been born in him. He landed safely.

But what was to come was doubly hazardous, now, and Farrell's face was haggard and

drawn as six men came forward from the shelter of the trees. Two of the six were Graves and Humphreys—dirty, unshaven, but apparently well.

Russ hopped out and went to meet them, his hand outstretched. His passenger, gun ready, was behind him. Russ veered to the right, and Graves and Humphreys, whose hands were bound behind their backs, did likewise.

"How are you, sir? And you, Humphreys?" Russ was saying, without a look at the bandits, and as he patted their backs he whispered fiercely:

"Ease away from the bunch!"

"Where's the money?" rasped a heavy voice, and Russ turned to confront a giant of a man with a full red beard and sun-reddened face.

"I've got it," Russ said steadily. "It's in the ship. By the way, my motor went dead up there and I'll have to fix it."

"Not now, you won't!" rasped the bearded man, and Russ saw grins on the faces of the others. Only one was a Mexican, apparently, and the others, while by no means appealing, still did not look as ferocious as bandits are supposed to look. They seemed merely tanned,

competent border men—though one or two had shifty eyes.

"You'll start afoot—it's only ten mile—and yuh can come back after yore ship to-morruh!" stated the leader. "We don't aim tuh have yuh around here. Everything all right, Casey?"

Russ's passenger nodded. Farrell, the blood pounding through his veins, saw that Humphreys and Mr. Graves were strolling along at an angle toward the ship—but getting farther away from the group all the time. He hoped they'd understood.

"Guns ain't loaded, radio's off, no ammunition in the ship," Casey reported.

"Where's the dinero?" repeated the bearded man.

"I'll get it," Russ said. "It's hidden in the ship."

He turned, and trotted toward the ship. It was headed broadside to the group, pointed up the hill. Graves and Humphreys, their eyes glowing, were standing by the tail, their hands still bound. The bandits wore two guns apiece.

The money was under the front seat, but Russ, on fire with excitement and suspense, got in the rear. If he were wrong about his surmise

that "Casey" had cut off the gas to make him think the motor was dead, three geese were cooked—but he must gamble.

Lulled into security by their numbers and their knowlege that the three were unarmed, the bandits straggled toward the ship. Russ was stooped in the rear cockpit. His hand was thrust down the back of his shirt, open at the neck. In a trice he had pulled out the one ammunition drum that had been bound flat between his shoulder blades. He stood upright, his hand hidden, and looked. Not a gun was drawn—they were twenty yards away——

His eye took in the Lewis on its scarfmount. Then, with the speed of a rattlesnake striking for the kill, his hand slammed the magazine down on top of the top gun. His hand found the trigger.

"Don't move!" he shouted, and the gun, pointed into the air, spat a volley of death.

"Come here, boys!" he called to Graves and Humphreys. Then to the bandits: "Make one move, any of you, and you're gone! Hands up!"

They put them up. There was nothing else to do. In less than a second that gun would have mowed them down. They stood, cursing, while

Russ, one hand on the trigger and his eyes always on his captives, forced one to come ahead, allow Russ to get his guns, and then give him a knife to cut the bonds of Graves and Humphreys. Graves's remarkable gray eyes were pools of light, his face one broad grin. And Humphreys looked as though he were seeing ghosts.

The bandits were disarmed, one by one, walking forward to have it done, and then bound hand and foot with safety wire. Soon they were laid in a row under the trees.

"We'll be back after you within two hours," Russ assured them. "Now let's see about the ship."

There was little to see to. The gas had been turned off from the rear seat, as Russ had surmised.

"Well, we can take off, then," Russ said, his freckled face alight. Then it sobered, as he thought of Humphreys. "What happened?" he asked sharply—and his eyes were not on Graves.

That gentleman, however, unruffled as ever, answered.

"In that little clearing, which is the only one between Marfa and El Paso, we saw a horse

standing, and a man lying prone on the ground. We landed to investigate. These bandits captured us without a struggle. They were hidden in a ruined adobe shack at one side. Then they burned and buried the ship to hide it—and brought us here. The supposedly wounded man was a decoy. Apparently they knew who we were—and that we'd fly over the clearing."

Farrell's face flushed. He was profoundly ashamed of himself—and it was part of his nature to do what he did next.

He turned to the Donovan Field man.

"Humphreys, we all figured that the only way Mr. Graves could be delivered to these bandits was through you," he said frankly. "I'm sorry and ashamed of myself. I'll admit I didn't like you—but I'm sorry."

Humphreys's dark, lined face was a study, and his black eyes were furious for a moment. Then Graves's voice cut in:

"Lieutenant Humphreys has been—as fine a comrade in distress as one could wish," he said quietly.

"Shake?" inquired Russ, and Humphreys did.

"I didn't think you were anything but a false alarm, either," he admitted. "But, Farrell—

you're there! Say, what have the papers been saying?"

"They'll say plenty more," grinned the happy Farrell. "Let's go!"

An hour later, they were home, and by daybreak next day the bandits were in the hands of the Mexican authorities. The border patrol never knew whether they had planned to steal a ship or not—for sometimes, in Mexico, they have very quick and sudden methods of dealing with the bandits that have terrorized that thinly settled country. But Graves's opinion was:

"They refused to talk to me. Now they can't. But I'm convinced that they were part of the organization we are fighting. I say that because they, like Williams, evidently intended to steal a ship. The ransom was a side issue. Which means——"

"The fellow that I carried down there knew 'planes like a book," Russ interrupted. "An ordinary cheap kidnaper wouldn't——"

"Of course," nodded Graves. "What I'm wondering is—did the Mexicans actually execute all those men? Well, whether they did or not, we have no hope of talking to them. Maybe they wouldn't have confessed, anyhow, any more than

Williams has, and Heaven knows he won't open his mouth for love or money.

"Anyhow, all of this seems to mean——"

"That the smugglers are using airplanes?" Russ said eagerly.

Graves nodded, and a warm smile flitted across his broad-browed, ascetic face.

"I shouldn't wonder if we had the men to stop them," he said casually, and to Russ the words were an accolade.

CHAPTER III

THE BATTLE OF THE BIG BEND

THE tireless Graves took off within an hour after his arrival at the airdrome, for El Paso, and it was two days later that he returned. He had completed his organization from McMullen to Fort Bliss.

He took time to wash his oil-grimed face and change his clothes, first inquiring whether anything had turned up in his absence. Nothing had—the patrols had been uneventful.

No sooner had he completed his toilet than the word went out from headquarters:

"Everybody wanted right away!"

Russ always got a "kick," as he expressed it, out of listening to Graves talk. Now, as the dozen airmen gathered on the steps of headquarters and concentrated their attention on the Federal agent, he was marveling anew at the two sides of the man.

He stood in front of the group, dressed in a white shirt open at the neck and khaki riding breeches. He looked like an aristocrat of wealth and culture—a studious gentleman, which he was. It was hard to think of him as what he was —until that profile came into view.

He turned to answer a question of Kennard's, and Russ, watching for it, nevertheless got the tiny shock which the sight always gave him. It was as though Graves had changed his face entirely. Jutting, high-bridged nose, a well-cut mouth that drooped with a hint of cruelty in it, brow and chin sloping slightly inward—it was the hawk-like profile of the ruthless man-hunter. Keenness, aggressiveness, fierce resolution were there, and the gray hair was like a belligerent topknot to crown the countenance of an Indian on the warpath.

His words, as always, were terse, forthright, to the point; soldierly sentences, well marshaled and drilled.

"Therefore," he concluded, "all is in readiness. Lights, ships, men, with the exception of a few who will join later. As I have said repeatedly, this Big Bend sector is the most important one along the border. Hence you men have double

responsibility. A ship will be on patrol night and day, every hour of the twenty-four from now on. Every man must be on the alert, always. You must eat, sleep, and think nothing but this: a huge organization of daring outlaws, equipped, doubtless, with the most modern of aircraft, menaces the welfare of the United States, and on you rests the responsibility of thwarting these men and bringing them to time.

"Marfa will be my headquarters, Captain. The flights are all instructed to the same effect. Starting at five o'clock this afternoon, patrols will be made as outlined. The searchlight system for night flying will be turned on at dusk every night, and the light guards are in their places. You have the signal system, both by flashlight and ground strips, to be used. You must have it memorized by the time you are due for patrol. That's all, gentlemen."

Just then a battered flivver gave a wheezing cough, as if it had been waiting for the incisive Graves to finish, and came rattling and bumping on into the huge sandy airdrome. It was one of the Marfa taxis.

The airmen waited there on the steps, and Russ wondered whom the taxi could be bring-

ing. There was baggage on the running board —had reinforcements arrived?

"We sure need a new man or two," the red-headed flyer told Benson, beside him. "We'll get four hours' patrol a day, as we're hooked up now."

"Flying over the worst country in the world, and always expecting to be hopped on," Benson drawled slowly.

With every passing day Benson was meaning more to the fiery, impulsive Farrell. He knew the world, and books, and lots of things in which Russ was just beginning to be interested.

But the flivver had stopped in front of headquarters. And from it stepped a young giant in the uniform of a First Lieutenant of the Air Service.

For a moment there was silence. Russ, somehow, felt a sort of physical shock as his blue eyes took in the Gargantuan proportions of the young Hercules before him, and felt, in a vague way, the impact of a personality as powerful as the body.

"Captain Kennard?" inquired the stranger in a deep, rich voice.

"Right here," stated the stocky little C.O.

With his cap on one side of his head, showing thick, coarse black hair, and with every ornament on his perfectly fitting blouse shining, the dark-eyed stranger grinned widely. His teeth were large and very white, and when he smiled there was a white gash across his dark, olive-skinned face. He seemed to glow with exuberant life.

"I'm a reserve officer," he said, choosing his words with the care of one who wishes to make a good impression. "Lieutenant Anthony Norton is my name. I applied for active duty with troops and was assigned to your flight."

"I see," nodded Kennard, but Russ caught a look of surprise in his eyes.

Russ himself was astonished. Why should a reserve officer who happened to want active duty be assigned to the border patrol, made up of veterans who had been picked to perform the most arduous duty the service afforded? It seemed unbelievable.

"Meet the gang," Kennard said to the newcomer in his throaty voice, and went on to introduce him.

Russ had rarely been more impressed than he was by Norton's personality. And yet he was

conscious that he was half-instinctively drawing back a little from the man. In the young flyer's mind those days there was but one idea: the successful completion of the duty they were on. He dreamt it, lived it, was always conscious of it. And there, in the depths of the Big Bend, with the mountains towering above the airdrome, with thousands of miles of desert around them, it was not easy to forget that hundreds of outlaws were lurking in the chaparral—and that already they had tried to out-maneuver the flight. Russ, while attracted to Norton, did not yield himself unreservedly to that attraction, and he couldn't help grinning a bit sympathetically at young Jimmy Jennings's gay, jesting greeting of the newcomer:

"Glad to know you, Norton. But you'd better have your identification papers with you if you're joining this gang. A few days ago we had a fellow come roaming in here as you have——"

"What do you mean?" The question was like a sudden clap of thunder.

In a flash, every man there was taut and silent. That challenge had been an explosion. Never had Russ seen such a sudden change in a man. It was as though the skies themselves had

turned from flawless blue to churning black mist in a second. Norton's dark eyes were demoniac pools of hate, his full lips were twisted in a snarl, and his thick brows were drawn into a heavy frown.

The care-free Jennings stepped back a pace in sheer astonishment. Then the fighting blood that had made him an outstanding ace in the war boiled up.

"Just what I said!" he flared. "Now that you've made an issue of it! I intended to kid you, but if you want to go into hysterics, I'll say more!"

For a full ten seconds the big stranger stood rigid. His effort to control the murderous resentment within him was plain to everyone. Russ felt as if Jimmy had laughingly lit a match and started something like the Chicago Fire raging —and he found himself aching to spring to Jimmy's side to be right there if needed. With difficulty, he restrained himself from doing the thing for which Jimmy would not forgive him.

Finally Norton spoke, and his voice was thick with passion.

"I ought to take you out and beat you until you can't stand!" he choked. "You——"

"Come ahead, you blistered fool, if that's what you're after!" exploded Jimmy. "Of all the temperamental idiots——"

The big stranger leaped as though at the release of a spring that shot him forward. But the casual Slim Evans deftly thrust out a big foot, and sent Norton sprawling before he could reach the slim Jennings.

"Don't act young, Norton," Evans told him calmly. "Haven't got a guilty conscience, have you?"

He stooped, and jerked the raging newcomer to his feet. The entire flight—except Graves, who had left—looked as though they couldn't believe their eyes. This sudden rage was totally ununderstandable.

"There's no need for you to get excited, Norton," snapped Kennard grimly. "You're making a holy show of yourself. Jennings was kidding you—on the square. Just the same, no strangers get into this flight—we want word, chapter, and line. I've had no word that you were coming. I'm not insinuating anything—I'm just telling you!"

For a second, Norton stood there in the white-hot sun, like some fire-filled giant of old with

lightning in his eyes and thunder on his brow. Russ could feel the terrific vitality of the man—and his rage.

Then, suddenly, the reserve officer relaxed. His dark face was composed, but there was a shadow in his eyes as he said curtly:

"I see I'm very welcome. Well, I'm no more delighted to be here than you are to have me. Kids——" He paused to shoot a withering look at Jimmy, a look that seemed to include the near-by Russ as well. Then, deliberately, he resumed: "Kids never were my choice as companions. Here are your papers—all orders."

He jerked some documents from his blouse pocket and thrust them in Kennard's face.

The cocky C.O. bridled. "If that's the way you feel, say 'sir!' " he barked, and his gray eyes were bleak and cold.

That seemed to bring the stormy Norton up short.

"Sir!" he said steadily, but there was nothing cowed or shamefaced in him. He was like some superb beast facing the circle of his enemies, unafraid.

Kennard looked the papers over carefully, while the other flyers watched and wondered.

Russ's mind was more or less of a chaos. A little joking remark—and suddenly a cyclone had struck the post.

"Oh, so you're Tony Norton, are you?" Kennard commented. "Heard of you in France. Guess you did, too, Tex; and Jimmy, you should have. Credited with two Boches, according to his service record."

Russ opened his eyes a bit. Well, Norton did look like a man amply able to excel in anything, except holding his temper. However, there was no reason to wax hysterical over a couple of Boches. Jimmy Jennings was an ace, Tex MacDowell had got three German ships, Kennard himself two, and others one.

"Orderly!" bellowed Kennard, and when the soldier appeared from headquarters, the captain directed: "Show Lieutenant Norton to tent number seven. Get his luggage there. Supper's at six, Norton, and you'll get your check ride to-morrow."

"Check ride?" exploded Norton, and for a moment his eyes were tempestuous.

Kennard nodded.

"Rules of the service, whether you've had a

thousand hours or not!" he stated. "Going to have another catfit about that?"

The Captain was a hard-boiled egg, on occasion.

"No!" the young giant shot back. "But I'm saying one thing to you all. I come in here and get insulted by a gabby whippersnapper, and grinned at by his red-headed kid pal—have to take the slings and sneers of a bunch of flyers who think because they're here and form their own little throne gang that anybody else is an interloper and a thug to be suspected. Everybody's aching to shut me out. Well, that suits me. I don't give a hang about having anything to do with any of you, and I'll be happy if you'll leave me strictly alone!"

His heels came together, his marvelous, six-foot-three body was rigid, and he clicked into a perfect salute to Captain Kennard. Then he turned and strode off.

Kennard chuckled, but his eyes were not twinkling.

"Terrible Tony Norton!" he remarked. "How do you feel, Jimmy? And you, Russ? Tony doesn't seem to care for kids. But don't

feel too bad. The stories they told about that bird in France would fill a book. Terrible temper, impatient of all discipline, wanting to be a law unto himself, and all the rest of it. A terrible scrapper, in the air or on the ground. They said he'd tie into ten Germans all by himself, and that he didn't get credit for more than one tenth of the 'planes he really got, because he was always roaming over into Germany so far that nobody could confirm the fact that he got 'em.

"He's not going to run this outfit, though, and he can make a mark in the book to that effect right now!"

Russ and Jimmy grinned at each other, and Russ reflected that the episode was undoubtedly over as far as any chance of action was concerned—although, before supper, he heard tales enough concerning Norton, who was sulking in his tent, to increase even more his already consuming interest in the man. Some humorous, some tragic, all striking—the tales ranged from one about the time when Norton had licked an unpopular colonel and been courtmartialed for it, to one about the time when he'd been captured in Germany and then had escaped, stolen

a German ship, and flown home, climaxing his flight by joining a German formation and shooting down three of their 'planes, so rumor reported, before they got wise to him. The fact that he was officially credited with only two 'planes was due partly to his unpopularity with his superiors, and partly, as Kennard had said, to the fact that he was always prowling around several miles farther back in German territory than anyone else cared to go.

At supper that night, Norton strode in, sat down, and ate his meal without giving anyone a word or a look. He was evidently fiercely proud, and totally unconcerned about anyone's opinion of him. To casual attempts at conversation, he merely grunted replies. And all the time alert, impressionable Farrell was aware of the terrific strength and vitality of the man—the personality that radiated from him like a physical force.

Norton left the table as soon as he had finished, and Captain Kennard said abruptly:

"I'll start his course of sprouts by making him take his check ride with one of the 'kids'—you, Russ!"

"That'll please him," chuckled Tex Mac-

Dowell, and Russ had to grin, even though he felt a little sorry for Norton.

"Well, a bull-headed bird like him's got to learn sometime," Benson said placidly.

So, after a night during which the searchlights along the border flamed into the sky and the ships of the patrol roared above the Rio Grande all night long, Russ waited on the line for his passenger. He had had the four-to-six patrol, and had just had breakfast. The first ride was to be in a De Haviland—the only one at the airdrome—to make sure Norton was in practice. Then would come a Douglas, and after that all would be over.

Norton came striding from the mess hall, arrayed in O.D. shirt and helmet and goggles. The shirt revealed the barrel-like size of his chest, and the trim waist and tapering hips and legs of the perfectly built athlete. His dark, tempestuous, ruggedly handsome face was more striking than ever, framed in the helmet.

"I'll take off, and give you the stick up in the air. Just fly a minute and land as soon as you like," Russ told him. "Remember we're high above sea level here, and that you land faster——"

"You don't say so!" sneered Norton, and Russ reddened furiously.

But he held his tongue, got in, and in a moment was taking off.

At five hundred feet he shook the stick, and Norton, bowing mockingly from the back seat, took it. And in less than a minute Russ knew that the giant in the rear was a truly masterly pilot. Without slip or skid or slightest overcontrol, Norton tied the big, frail De Haviland in knots. He showed the absolute accuracy and perfect feel-of-the-ship, without the slightest jerkiness in handling it, of one pilot in a million.

They were a little higher than a thousand feet, finally, and Russ could see Jimmy Jennings coming roaring across the peaks on his way back from the patrol. Down below, Slim Evans's Douglas was warming up, to take off when Jimmy landed. About time for Norton to start down, Russ reflected—he himself was tired after a tense two hours over the deadly country to the west, watching for enemies.

But Norton was fresh, and he apparently enjoyed flying. Never had Russ seen a De Haviland flown more skillfully. And as the big reserve officer put it through its paces, Russ was

thinking about him. Everybody in the flight was wondering why he had been ordered on this particular outfit of the border patrol. It didn't seem natural for Washington to send a reserve man, no matter what his record, on that duty. But the wires had already flashed a message to Washington, and they'd soon know. Norton was certainly a peculiar character—fiery and individualistic, temperamental, doubtless very conceited, caring not a hoot what anybody else thought.

Russ stiffened, and his eyes flashed to the instrument board. The motor sputtered three times, caught momentarily, and died.

Something was wrong—ignition, probably. Thank heaven they were within gliding distance of the airdrome, nearly two thousand feet high. Automatically his hand was on the stick, and he was shaking it to signal that he would land it. Not that Norton wasn't all right, but Russ knew the field and the motor was dead.

He jazzed the throttle once to see if he could start the motor again. And at that instant a cloud of blue smoke mantled the Liberty, and through it, like greedy tongues, played blue flames. A great wave of heat fairly withered the

young flyer, whose face went white as he realized that the most deadly emergency of the air confronted him.

His left hand leaped to cut off the gas flow as his right gripped the stick and threw the ship into a vertical bank, nose up. Then full top rudder, to start the sideslip that was their only hope. The gas line had broken, and gas had sprayed over the red-hot motor.

Russ's goggles were almost torn from his face as that terrible sideslip started. But the upward draught would keep the flames from blowing straight back and burning the ship and its passengers to a crisp.

The heat was terrific as Russ fought with all the skill the years had given him to keep those flames from coming back. The right upper wing, pointed skyward, was smouldering, and the nearest struts blackened slowly. The instrument board was blistering, and his feet were feeling the heat as they pressed the rudder bar with almost maniacal force to keep the ship in the sideslip. Once lose that, and in one mighty sweep the flames would rush backward in the airstream, and the ship would be a bonfire.

Clouds of smoke obscured the upper wing,

most of the time, but Russ, his blue eyes wide with terror and pain, saw an ever-widening area of linen burn away. It seemed to melt into nothingness in an ever-widening circle. The heat in his cockpit, near the floor, was almost unbearable—and they were twelve hundred feet high. Not an indication of any lessening in the flames, either—soon the linen on the upper wing would be tearing, as well as burning away.

Eyes bleary, breath torn from his nostrils by the sideslip, Russ fought grimly, blindly on. The leather of his boots, it seemed, was charring too, and the smoke was beginning to nauseate him. He felt as though his feet were being toasted—and the upper wing, right in the path of the upward blown flames, was continuing to burn away. Soon it would become impossible to keep it up there—and then their fate would be sealed.

As though in a nightmare, he felt a grip on his shoulder. He turned blindly, in time to see Norton, hands on the cowling of his cockpit, calmly climb out. In a second Russ, scarcely believing his eyes, saw the set-faced flyer hanging over nothingness by his hands. Then, bit by bit, Norton eased himself along as he dangled be-

side the fuselage. Soon he was hanging by the cowling of Farrell's cockpit—then he had swung to the lower wing on the upper side of the ship.

Now he was holding himself by a center section strut. And in his hand was the fire extinguisher which was placed on the cowling. Russ himself could not have used it because he could not reach the motor.

Russ fought for consciousness as he kept the ship in its slip and watched Norton. With one arm crooked around the forward center section strut, the sleeve on it burning before Farrell's anguished eyes, Norton leaned above that furnace of heat and thrust the extinguisher down as far as he could. Methodically, he pumped away, while the flesh of one arm cooked and his eyelashes and eyebrows singed away.

Still up seven hundred feet, with a crippled right wing, charring struts, melting motor—and Norton pumped on, hanging limply with his arm around the strut and his feet on the lower wing runway. The smoke was lessening gradually.

It was gone. Russ, tortured almost beyond endurance, saw through bleary eyes that Norton

was almost unconscious, slumped against the fuselage but holding to his strut like grim death. Russ must keep his wits until they got down—figures were rushing crazily below him—the world was spinning in a very peculiar manner—gosh, that pain—the ground!

Every bit of strength in his superb body, and all the will power he possessed, were used as he forced himself into momentary clear-headedness. The fire was out—he dived for a moment, fighting to keep that right wing from drooping. He tried to make a good landing, but the wheels hit first.

As the ship bounced, Russ himself lost consciousness, thankful for the blackness which gave him relief from pain.

It was only a minute later when he came to, in the ambulance. And on the opposite cot was Norton, with Major Evers standing on the step behind as they rushed for Marfa.

"You're a blamed good flyer, Farrell," stated Norton, and no one would have suspected that one arm was a mass of raw, reddened flesh.

"Norton," Russ said weakly, "you did the nerviest thing——"

"Apple sauce!" bayed Norton contemptu-

ously. "I had to save my own skin, didn't I? I crave no compliments, and flowers can be omitted."

And those were exactly his sentiments when he returned to the flight four days later, two days following Russ's return to duty. The giant's arm was still bandaged, and he could not fly for several days. But at the first meal, when the airmen tried to congratulate him and make him a member of the gang, Norton's eyes grew grim and his leonine black head went back.

"Listen," he said levelly, his eyes playing around the table, "just because it was necessary for me to climb around to save my neck doesn't change things in the least. It doesn't make me anybody different than I was, nor does it call for any sloppy love feast as far as I'm concerned."

And he went his way as before, keeping to himself, and showing every hour of the day exactly how little the friendship or even the companionship of the others meant to him.

And for the week which followed, that atmosphere of hostility generated by him became more and more oppressive as the flyers' nerves were drawn tighter and tighter under the strain.

By day the 'planes roared on their ceaseless patrols, and by night the searchlights pierced the sky as the ships flew above the mountain and above cañons that held pools of shadow. It was a cruel ordeal—flying themselves ragged while they waited tensely for the coming of the climax—which didn't come. Always on the alert, marooned there in the shadow of the silent mountains, it was no wonder that nerves grew frayed under the physical and mental strain of it all. In Marfa, Graves, like a spider in the center of a net of wires reaching all over the country, waited and watched and read reports of a hundred agents, from Mexico to Chicago. And ever in his incisive, impersonal way, he lashed the flyers into ceaseless watchfulness. Not a man left the post—night and day they must be ready, and always one ship was in the air.

And somehow Norton's presence at the table, like that of a brooding spectre at the feast, was a thorn in the flesh of the driven airmen. His silent but dominant presence was like a heavy load on their spirits, and some grew to hate him.

Russ, eager and sensitive as a high-strung thoroughbred, felt it all more keenly than most;

for Norton had saved his life—and the man interested Farrell mightily. Word had come from Washington that Norton had been ordered to the flight, correctly enough—but there had been no explanation. Was he there on special duty, reporting to some mysterious personage high in the councils of the government? There was some extraordinary reason for his presence—that was sure.

Still the flying went on, and nothing happened. And every man knew that something was bound to happen sooner or later—and they grew thin-faced and hollow-eyed waiting for it. Often, at night, Russ sat out under the stars with Benson, and soaked in the peace of the towering mountains and the starlit border night as Benson talked of books and far places and life as it was lived the world around. It opened up a new world to Russ, which was to mean much to him later—and it was a lifesaver to the taut young pilot whose nerves were drawn to the breaking point. One night, without any explanation whatever, Norton sat down beside them. For an hour he sat and smoked, and talked a little about Egypt with Benson. Then, without a word of explanation, he left. But somehow

Russ felt better about him after that—as though Norton had admitted he was human.

Then, one evening, when a light rain was falling, Graves came rushing into the airdrome in a big car. Russ was taking off on the six-to-eight patrol and could not wait. Two hours in the fine rain that tortured his face, and he was back. As he came up to the line he saw a figure in the hangar, and knew it was Norton. The lights were on, and he was tinkering with his ship.

At headquarters Captain Kennard told him the news.

"Graves has word from an agent in Mexico that something seems to be afoot," he said tensely. "A gang of foreigners gathered at Cari Mana. Good landing field there, but no ships. Where *they* come from nobody knows. But it looks as though things would break to-night—praise be!"

"Fine!" Russ exploded, eyes burning in his drawn face.

He ran out to look over his ship. Must see that the machine guns were O.K., and everything shipshape. The rain had stopped, but it

was the only ship on the line. And Norton was standing next to it.

"Your front drift wire's pretty loose," he stated in his deep voice, and somehow his eyes seemed to be like two coals in his head. That queer magnetism that radiated from him seemed more pronounced than ever.

As Russ inspected his ship, the others were trundled out, until finally all seven hounds of the air were waiting in line, as though crouched for the spring after their prey. The flyers waited impatiently as the hours dragged on.

At eleven o'clock the telephone rang. It was Graves, and Captain Kennard listened.

"Right!" he barked, and whirled to his men. "Three ships started from Mexico loaded with aliens—landed at Cari Mana and got 'em," he snapped. "We have less than an hour to cover this half of the Big Bend. You all know your places—let's go!"

Norton was out before the Captain had finished, and Russ was close behind him. As he got to his ship, Norton's motor was running, and he took off with less than a minute's warm-up. He had no observer, being an extra pilot. Russ got

his motor going, and Benson was ready in the back seat as he warmed up the big twelve-cylinder Liberty. The airdrome was flooded with light from the landing searchlight, and the other one's beam shot straight upward into the sky.

Not another ship started, although mechanics and pilots were working desperately. Russ wondered why.

He cut his throttle as Jimmy Jennings rushed over to him.

"Every motor's had the whole doggone ignition system jimmed up, and we can't get started for half an hour!" the slim young ace raved. "What do you know——"

"I do know!" shouted Russ, and in a split second it came to him. Norton! He'd prowled around the hangar, so they'd said, for nearly two hours, pretending to work on his ship—only reason he hadn't jimmed up Russ's, too, was because Russ had been on patrol. Russ jerked a thumb skyward toward Norton's 'plane, his eyes blazing fiercely.

Jimmy understood.

"And I'll bet he'll stay up there and use his guns to keep anybody from taking off!" raved

Farrell. "It's sure as death and taxes—he's in on it and wants 'em to have a clear path to come over——"

He stopped there. Norton was circling above the airdrome, and right then his ship went into a dive, and a stream of bullets flashed into the ground several hundred yards away. A warning not to take off—why, he could pick off those ships like flies as they started from the ground.

But Russ, at a time like that, was not just a flyer. He was gripped with a fierce resolution that had no tinge of fear or self-interest in it. Norton might figure he didn't understand, or something, and let him get into the air.

He gave his big Douglas the gun, and took the air.

Norton was circling above him and now diving down. Russ flew on, climbing slowly, as though totally unconscious of anything extraordinary. In a moment Norton was parallel with him, but two hundred feet higher. In the light of the exhaust flame, his face was clearly visible. He motioned Russ downward and patted his guns significantly.

Russ stared, as though in total lack of comprehension, and waved, meanwhile climbing

for dear life. Again Norton motioned downward, and patted his guns. His sardonic grin, Russ could see. The other ships helpless for half an hour—then, if they tried to take off, Norton to hold the fort long enough to let the smugglers through and give them the chance to fly back into Mexico—it was a perfect scheme.

Russ made ready. There was the man who had saved his life, and never had duty been so hard. But he must do what should be done.

Grim-faced and bleak-eyed, he measured the distance with his eyes. Then, with the Liberty going wide open, he dived slightly. The speed meter crept up to one hundred and sixty miles —and the stick came back and his foot jammed right rudder on.

In a perfect right-wing turn, the ship swooped upward and to the right. For just a minute he had his bead, and his guns spat forth their drumming song. He had stolen a march on Norton, and for a moment he thought he had won. The ship above him faltered, and then went into a dive. Had he hit the gigantic pilot?

If he had, Norton came to himself quickly, and the upper ship zoomed for altitude. Russ, his heart pounding as he realized the duel ahead

with an experienced air fighter, saw that he was only eight hundred feet high. Norton was about a thousand—but Norton had no observer, and he had Benson and his guns in the back seat. That made it more even.

And on Russ's broad shoulders rested full responsibility for holding the border that night.

Norton came hurtling down at him, now, streaks of fire flaming from his guns. Russ twisted his ship desperately to the right, to give Benson a shot. He was still safe, as he banked around to catch a shot as Norton hurtled by.

But Norton was too wise for that. Before coming too close he zoomed again, holding his altitude. Russ chandelled around quickly and let go. No effect, apparently, and he used the instant's respite to climb still farther.

Then started the real battle. The two great ships twisted and turned like outlaws of the sky, their motors bellowing wide open and their guns spitting fire. The exhaust flames described circles in the night, and it seemed to the white-faced Farrell that the universe itself must be shaking with the din. From the rear seat, Benson was coolly pumping shots whenever he had the opportunity. Diving, zooming, chandelling,

the two monsters of the air fought their duel to the death.

There were several flyers who could have flown as well as Russ Farrell flew that night, but none who could have flown better. Under his magic hand his Douglas was like a tiny scout as he stood it on its tail or sent it shrieking downward or turned it so abruptly that it was half on its back. Bullet holes in the wings and his windshield shattered—still he himself was untouched.

Four minutes—five, the ferocious struggle continued. Norton never got too close, because he was afraid of the guns in the rear cockpit. But it seemed as if Russ could not hit him—and Norton had nearly four hundred feet advantage in altitude now.

Then Farrell, like an emotionless statue in the front cockpit, saw his desperate opportunity and knew he must take it. He'd be forced to the ground soon—Norton couldn't miss all the time as he dived downward. He'd be bound to get position eventually, despite all Russ could do.

He was zooming upward for a dive, and Russ, too, was in a dive—and only six hundred feet high. Farrell, his eyes blazing as he forgot everything but his objective, eased back on the

stick. Norton was behind and above him, zooming upward.

The Douglas swept upward in a great arc, and Russ was scarcely conscious that he was hanging upside down as he squinted along his guns. For a second the other ship loomed before them—and he held his ship there on its back, perilously close to the ground. His fingers never left the machine-gun control. A hundred shots or more he sent on their way, while his boyish face looked older than time itself as he thought of Norton huddled over that blazing motor a week before. Yet it must be done.

And it was done. As Norton's ship floated downward, out of control, Farrell's ship swooped downward and out of the loop. The ground seemed within inches, almost, as he fought to pull the ship out. It was the airdrome—they'd be right over it. Would the ship never come out? They were going to crash head on—there wasn't a chance.

For a wild instant he gave up hope. Then he shouted wildly as he felt the ship come level, and the wheels bounce it terrifically. Inches had meant the difference between life and death—and they had won.

Norton had too, if saving his life was a partial victory. Farrell relaxed weakly as he saw that fluttering ship level off for a second as Norton moved in the cockpit, and crash on one wing as the flyers below rushed toward it.

Russ, weak from the reaction, found Norton in the ambulance, shot through the shoulder. The flyers surrounded him while the mechanics worked like mad on the ships. The big reserve man had an unreadable look in his dark eyes as he saw Farrell.

"I should have got you at the first," he said calmly. "Somehow I couldn't. You got me first crack. I was bleeding from then on."

Russ could think of nothing to say. Kennard broke the silence by saying:

"It will go easier with you if you tell us——"

"What do I care about myself?" blazed Norton. "I'm proud of what I tried to do—and ashamed because I didn't do it!"

There was the glow of fanaticism in his eyes as he said it, and Kennard shrugged his shoulders.

"I will tell you one thing, though," Norton said in a half whisper, as though weakening fast. "They won't come over to-night—now."

That was all he was to say, then. He had months in a hospital to look forward to, however, and there was always a chance that he might talk later. The flyers, naturally, did not take his word that night, and within a half hour all but Russ had gone to guard the river. Russ's ship was riddled with bullets and unfit to fly.

Shortly after midnight, the word came by radio that the three ships had turned back into Mexico, and as patrol ship after patrol ship returned for gas, they remained at the airdrome. At three in the morning, the last one was back, and as the weary airmen gathered in a group, Graves, apparently as fresh and keen as ever, was still on the job.

"Norton, evidently, was hired by this gang," he said. "And he's half Italian. To many people—to foreigners especially—our restrictions of immigration is an entirely unwarranted measure, a crime that keeps poor Europeans from the advantages of this prosperous country. Norton's peculiar—a fanatic—and I don't doubt his sincerity. He's a bona fide reserve officer, of course, and had influence enough to get himself ordered here.

"The smuggling ships turned back, evidently,

when they caught sight of our 'planes. Thank you all, gentlemen. I think the end is near. Russ, it had better be, for your sake. Because, if there's any dirty work ahead, I don't doubt you're destined to be in it up to the neck, whether anyone else is or not! I'm glad I'm not red-headed!"

"I doubt whether anybody can pry anything out of him, either," Kennard remarked. "He's just the kind that would stand torture before he'd say a word."

"Like Williams," smiled Graves. "They're still working on him, and he just thumbs his nose at 'em! Every time I think of what must be locked in his head, I get more furious."

"Well," Slim Evans put in, "talk or no talk, we'd better be putting padlocks, anchors, and storm windows on our ships. Doggoned if I'd be surprised if one of 'em started to run away by itself!"

CHAPTER IV

THE MINE, THE MOB, AND MAYFIELD

CAPTAIN KENNARD came striding into the mess hall, taking prodigious steps for legs so short as his.

"Got a call for help from Silverton," he announced raucously to the dozen flyers assembled in the mess hall. "Miners on strike. Situation a little peevish. Who wants to go?"

Russ Farrell was a split second before anybody else, and in his eagerness he leaped to his feet.

"I do!" he almost yelled, and the Captain grinned.

"I took that for granted," he remarked. "Well, if you want to, it's O.K. with me. Since we've been on this job, you've done enough to deserve any little vacation you want."

Benson chuckled.

"Between Blackie Williams, those bandits, and Terrible Tony Norton, Russ has been pretty busy at that. Seems funny that a whole week

has passed without some battle, murder, or sudden death."

Slim Evans gestured spaciously.

"If you haven't any wild yen to go, Ben, I'd like to be Farrell's passenger," he remarked. "A friend of mine named Matt Downs used to run a tough little mine in this country, and Sleepy Spears and I helped him out once on a similar deal. What say?"

"Go ahead," Benson assented. The quiet observer had seen too much of the world and its troubles to become excited about missing anything.

Russ had no kick whatever. Slim Evans was a veteran of the border—and of a thousand other places where trouble comes quickly and is dealt with summarily. Lunch was an unusually delightful meal for the freckled-faced young pilot; his blue eyes sparkled zestfully as he ate. So there was trouble in the little mining camp buried, just as the airdrome was, in the depths of the Big Bend mountains. Sounded interesting.

"I'll get the ship ready, Slim," he announced, and was up from the table without waiting for dessert.

His big two-ton Douglas observation 'plane was on the line, and in a moment was roaring away on the warm-up. Ten minutes later, with Slim in the rear seat, it was hurtling across the big sandy airdrome, shimmering in the rays of the blinding Texas sun.

Silverton was thirty miles due south toward the Rio Grande, and it did not take long for Russ to make fifteen hundred feet of altitude —enough so that he could safely bank his ship southward and send it on its roaring way over the jagged peaks and mesquite-covered valleys of the Big Bend.

In less than twenty minutes, the twelve-cylinder Liberty had dragged the ship over the last mountain, and below, straggling thinly along a narrow valley floor, was Silverton. The town was more than a mile long, and consisted almost entirely of two rows of frame and adobe shacks, all of one story only, facing each other across the road that writhed through the valley. It ran north and south, and the only landing field was just south of town—a narrow clearing with a two-way slope at the foot of a mountain.

Farrell's tanned face was wreathed in an expectant smile, and his eyes flashed behind his

goggles as he spiraled downward over the town. Things certainly did look interesting. The mouth of the mine, set in a gorge that ran at right angles to the street and ended a few hundred yards from the northern extremity of it, was deserted. And down there in the street there seemed to be hundreds of loungers. The sidewalks were full of ant-like figures, and groups of them stood in the dusty street.

"We're sure creating a sensation," Russ reflected as he spiraled lower.

And they were. Men were running excitedly, and soon each black figure was crowned with a white smudge that represented an upturned face. The lower he got, the more Russ could see how barren and ugly the town was—false fronts on the business buildings, the dwellings mere hovels.

Suddenly, he leaned over farther, and every muscle in his body tensed. A man had been walking rapidly down the street, alone. As he reached a large group of sombreroed loiterers, they suddenly surrounded him. And a second or two later that group was a seething maelstrom of men. In the center of it, fighting mightily, was that one lone pedestrian.

Russ was less than five hundred feet high, but without cutting the throttle of his four-hundred-fifty-horsepower motor he sent his ship flashing downward in a power dive. Slim's hand clutched his shoulder, and the lanky airman's thin face was ablaze as he pointed. Russ nodded his comprehension.

That fight was truly terrific, now. Everyone on the street was running toward it—and yet no one lifted a hand to help the lone battler whom Russ instinctively felt would be beaten and trampled to death.

The flyer's face was white and strained, and he raged as he realized his helplessness. Whatever the merits of the case, it was horrible to see a single man fighting against such odds—and the fight had been started by the mob, not by the man. The furious pilot would have given five years of his life to be at the lone fighter's side, and he dived his ship without mercy.

Then he gave a shout of relief that he himself could not hear. By some miracle, that mighty stranger below had broken loose from the mob. He tore through the spectators as an All-American fullback might crash through a team of wooden soldiers. Russ, almost scraping

the tops of the buildings now, could see spectators go down like ten-pins before his rush. In a moment, the dozen or so men who had been actively assaulting him were in full chase, and Russ thought he saw the flame of a gun.

The fugitive had leaped into a car at the curb, and just as Russ felt sure that the mob was going to get him, the little car got under way and went rocking down the street under full steam.

From that wildly scurrying mob below, a group resolved itself and climbed into a larger car. It took them a moment or so to get it started, and the fleeing man had a start of perhaps a quarter mile as he sped southward down the street, on the trail for Presidio.

Russ was circling now, so low that he had to watch for wires, and keep a wary eye on the close-looming mountain sides. His whole heart and soul were in his eyes as he watched and hoped that the magnificent fighter below might get away. He turned to Slim, and that big-nosed, devil-may-care fatalist craned his long neck over the side and saluted the man on the ground.

But he was not going to get away. The pursuing car was much bigger and more powerful, and it was gaining swiftly. It was speeding like

mad down the two-mile straightaway that dropped the road into the curves of its mountain course, and it was but three hundred yards or less back of the laboring flivver ahead when Russ, afire with his desire to help, made his decision.

He dared not use his guns to send a warning in front of the pursuing car—he was too low, and the bullets might hit the man ahead. Anyhow, a burst into the ground ahead might mean nothing to the pursuers. But he felt that the fleeing man was a dead man if they caught him —and they were going to catch him.

The road was bounded by ditches, with only a few feet of cleared space on either side. Without hesitation, Russ completed his circle, until he was pointed in the same direction as the cars and flying right over the road. Then, with motor wide open he dived the hundred feet to the road, leveling off five feet above it.

The Douglas was hurling itself along that dusty highway at one hundred sixty miles an hour as Russ, his eyes dancing with a queer cold flame, exposed his face to the terrific airstream and guided his ship like the master pilot he was, the master pilot that fifteen hundred

hours in the air had made him. He was conscious of no fear, only of fierce joy in the coming battle.

A hundred feet or more back of the speeding car, he cut the throttle all the way. Instantly, the ship started to lose speed. A hundred forty, thirty, ten—and he inched the throttle on. Just enough to keep the 'plane in the air. He kicked the rudder slightly to the left—the ship swerved to the left of the road. Throttle all the way on again, and the right wing dipped slightly as Farrell's blazing eyes remained glued on the car that was now within fifty feet of its prey. He saw two heads thrust from it, looking back at him.

"Too late!" the red-headed firebrand grunted, and then and there nosed down a little.

Just for a split second. The wing was almost dragging the road. A foot would make all the difference.

At just the right time, he nosed up a trifle, and that right wing tip flipped the back of the big touring car. For a moment, Russ fought his great ship as the shock on the right lower wing slowed it and almost nosed it into the ground. A wild thrill when he thought he must hit the

leading car as he struggled desperately to hold the ship off the ground—but he missed it, by inches. He had to bank steeply, though, and for a second the misused right wing lightly touched the ground.

Then he leveled off, only a foot above the road, and held the ship there until he had flying speed again. But the tip of the right wing was wobbling dangerously—the spar in the leading edge had cracked.

He must land and find out how badly it was injured—immediately. His field was only a few hundred yards away. With his eyes frozen to that wobbling wing tip, he turned slowly, and then dared a glance downward. He forgot his own peril as he saw the representatives of the mob crawling like rabbits from beneath the wreck of their car. It had been thrown clear across the ditch.

The wing held. The field, running north and south, along the road, sloped upward to the north, and also had a downward slope from west to east, the narrow way, because it was at the foot of a mountain. It was not easy to make it, but Russ, handling his throttle with infinite care, stalled the ship in and stopped, rolling a

safe fifty yards from the fence on the northern edge.

"At-a-boy!" crowed Slim, as soon as the motor had sputtered into silence. "That wing looks like it was clipped. You sure smacked that car pretty——"

"Let's see what it's all about, eh?" Russ interrupted.

He could not rest for an instant. When the impulsive, reckless youngster found himself in the midst of an emergency, he was a human dynamo until it was over.

They trotted down the road and could see their victims in a knot at one side of it—two were stretched on the ground, but didn't seem to be badly hurt. There were five standing. Farther down the road the smaller car, now pointed toward them, was at a standstill.

"Looks as—though we—might have the odds against us—here," panted Slim with contentment. "But I guess—they'll treat us—with care. Like the—Rangers. We've tried to—get that tradition. Two Rangers—can ride into a town like this—and hold it down—on their reputations. If one gets—hurt—they know that the rest of

the—Rangers'll never rest until—the bird that hurt him—gets his come-uppings."

Russ nodded. Their guns were swinging at their hips as they ran, and the group on the side of the road made no move.

"Let's see—the lone wolf!" Russ gulped; so they ran on by.

A strapping six-footer got out of the flivver, and met them with a broad grin on his fleshy face. He was as blond as a viking, and his homely, scarred face was curiously attractive. His nose was flat and crooked—evidently it had been broken—and his rugged jaw jutted forth belligerently below a wide, firm mouth. His eyes were level and steely gray below light eyebrows that had been bleached by the sun. His full face looked drawn, somehow, and his eyes were slightly weary and bloodshot, as though from lack of sleep.

"Thanks," he said in booming tones, and a ham-like fist crushed Farrell's sinewy paw. "First time I've ever seen the patrol in action."

Rus introduced Slim, and the scarred six-footer said briefly:

"Heard of you, Evans. My name's Christy.

I'm supposed to be G.M. and superintendent of this mine for the Amalgamated Ore Company of St. Louis, and I'm part owner as well."

Russ felt better. Whatever might be behind the ructions, at least this big chap was ready to define his position fully. As Russ pondered the matter, he saw two cars, full of men, coming from town. They stopped at the wreck.

"What's the lay?" inquired Slim, leaning casually against the flivver.

"Men on strike," grimly answered the stalwart blond giant. "For wages higher than the company could pay and make a profit. The books show that. But I think that's just an excuse. The real grievance is that I closed up the bootleg and gambling joints. Liquor and gambling never did go with work—and this border bunch I've got for labor have murdered and everything else because of rotten whiskey and gambling brawls. So I closed up the joints. And now somebody's got the bunch all wrought up—some dirty agitator has been stirring 'em up."

"They're tough, are they?" inquired Russ.

"Right. More than half Mexicans of the

cheapest kind. Another quarter Negroes, and the rest renegade whites. We haven't been able to get the better class of labor down here."

"Well, we might as well have it out with that bunch up there," Russ said, his blue eyes aflame. "They tried to mob you, did they?"

"Uh-huh," Christy said slowly, and the flame in his gray eyes belied his casual tone. "Urged on by one Dan Hawley, whom I'll tend to now. They'd have killed me."

"Is he the leader?" asked Slim, as they started up the road.

"Somewhat—but I don't believe he's back of it all!" Christy stated absently. "He's just a dumb would-be bad man. But some keen bird has got these men wrought up and is keeping 'em that way. And he's inflaming 'em against me all the time. I'd like to catch him!"

"Isn't there anybody in the forsaken hole to help you out?" Russ asked him.

"Oh, about a quarter of the men aren't in sympathy with the strike, but they're scared of the majority. No good. So it comes down to two men—both wonders, but three ain't many to fight three hundred."

"Who are they?"

"My assistant, Mayfield—the cockiest, funniest, nerviest, squarest little devil that ever breathed. And my bookkeeper, old Farnsworth. He's all right in the heart, but he's about as powerful as a caterpillar. Loyal but useless."

"Well, here we are," breathed Russ, and his big shoulders went back and his eyes commenced to glitter with that cold sheen that was always in them at times like this.

There were at least twenty men standing in a muttering group around the original pursuers of Christy. They were a roughly dressed, evil-faced, shifty-eyed crew. Christy, his big blond head held high and his mouth a thin gash below eyes that were tiny points of menace, strode directly toward them, the khaki-clad flyers at his heels.

"I didn't dare use a gun—it would bring on a gunfight sure enough," Christy shot from the corner of his mouth.

The group eyed the three nervously. Somehow—and Russ thrilled with leaping pride in his service as he thought of it—the advent of the flyers had caused all their murderous fury to ooze away. Christy walked up to a hulking, mahogany-faced man whose shoulders were high

and square, giving him the look of a man who's drawn his head down in for protection. He was long-nosed and small-eyed, and a fearful scar ran from his right eye across his upper lip.

"So you dirty yellow curs thought you'd mob me and string me up when you were ten to one, did you?" rasped Christy. "You're quite a general, Hawley. And I'm ready to meet you right now—in as many rounds as you like."

"Hold the fort, boys!" he shot back to the flyers, and they faced the mob, ready. Another car was coming from town, now—two cars. Both full.

"Come on," barked Christy savagely, but the furtive-eyed Hawley shrank back. Never had Russ seen such fear on a human countenance.

And as Christy took a step forward, Hawley suddenly turned and fled in genuine yellow cur fashion. He leaped the ditch and ran across the field toward the mountain side—making surprising time, despite his bulk. The twenty men looked after him blankly. Then, eyes glittering, they turned to surge slowly toward Christy, muttering darkly, darting looks at the alert flyers whose uniform and ship, and reputation as border patrolmen held them in leash—kept

them from jumping in a body on the blond giant.

"Come on, any of you!" Christy challenged, and as he stood there with the sunlight on his touseled yellow hair, he was like some mythological giant from the old Norse sagas. Undaunted, he held his ground, and as the two cars ground to a stop and disgorged some fifteen more sullen strikers, he included them in his challenge.

But no one stepped forward.

"Well, then, get out of here and go back to town—we don't want you anywhere near that ship!" barked Christy, and their hate-filled glances dropped. Yet they didn't start.

Christy waited a moment. The group stirred, broke a little, then suddenly massed together again, seemed more threatening. Russ tingled with the instinctive feeling that a real showdown was upon them.

"Go, or, by the great Horn Spoon, I'll handle you all at once!" bellowed Christy, and as he moved forward, closely followed by the airmen, the snarling strikers gave back a step. They were half afraid—yet there were something of the

spirit of a cornered rat in their eyes. And they held their ground, finally.

"Get out of here, you dumb bunch of two-for-a-cent garbage!" came a slightly high, precise voice, and striding through the group came a small, slim figure in a large sombrero that dwarfed him ludicrously. "Come on—beat it! Vamoose! *Pronto!*"

The sharp, small face turned right and left, and diamond-like little eyes flashed hither and thither. Russ stared in amazement as he saw these threatening roughnecks meet the little man's eyes, and then, slowly, one by one, take their growling way to the road. Hawley, more than halfway across the field, had stopped, turned, and lingered to watch and shake his fist.

"He's a brave boy—a long way off," observed Slim judicially. "Well, we didn't have to step up and see what weight the border patrol carries around here, did we? And who, Mr. Christy, might yonder little banty rooster be?"

Christy's eyes seemed to become larger, and his rugged face to soften. He shrugged his shoulders, as though to throw off a weight that had been burdening him.

"That, gentlemen, is none other than my assistant, Mr. Montmorency Mayfield," he said with a wintry little grin. "About a hundred and thirty pounds of dynamite with the nerve of a wounded grizzly."

"Watch him shoo that mob!" chuckled Slim, and Russ watched curiously.

He couldn't help grinning at the pint-size mining man, with his cowboy boots and gaudy neckerchief and umbrella-like sombrero. But, all the time, Russ's smooth-working brain, which always seemed to click along faster and more surely in times of stress, was busy. He was afraid that the cessation of the patrol for two years before the special outfit had come down on special duty had made the border forget. Those men hadn't acted as they should have until Mayfield arrived as a reinforcement. It didn't look so good.

"The little guy came in here a year ago," Christy was saying. "Knew little or nothing about mining. Now he knows about as much as I do. Smart as a whip, hard-boiled as a picnic egg, can lick his weight in wildcats, and's always ready to—that's Monty. Don't know what I'd do without him."

Mayfield came striding back, and his sharp little face with its small, bright eyes held a grin as he shook hands.

"Glad to see you," he said in his rapid-fire way. Somehow, his intonation and pronunciation gave one the impression that he was well educated. "Bob, I heard rumors about the men's figuring on making a swoop on the mine tonight. And somebody's feeding them a lot of liquor."

"And I'd give my left hand to know who!" barked Christy viciously. "Monty, that dumb Hawley's never the man behind the works in this deal. Some smart snake is prodding 'em on —has arranged all this and is trying to put over something."

"As I've been saying ever since this cooked-up strike started!" declared Mayfield. "But I'll swear I can't get a hint."

"Nor I!"

"Looks like we're supposed to be detectives, Russ," grunted Slim. "Let's have a look at the ship."

"Come here, Slim!" Russ interrupted quickly, and, out of earshot of the other two, he talked rapidly and forcefully.

Slim listened, wondered, and finally agreed. As they looked at the ship Russ whispered:

"She's in bad shape, but she'd fly all right—for an hour, anyway, I think," and Slim nodded.

But to the landsmen Russ stressed the damage done, saying regretfully: "Mighty chancy to take off in her. We'll 'phone Marfa and have a mechanic flown up here with some stuff to splice this front spar here. She's not much good to us here on the ground."

"That's so!" exploded Mayfield. "Gosh, let's get her patched up quick. One of these babies with a gun in the air can hold a regiment, but on the ground they're not worth a dime!"

It was arranged that Slim stay and guard the ship—the back-seat machine guns made that a simple matter—until Christy could send Farnsworth, his bookkeeper, out. As the three chugged down the main street—the only street, in fact—the packed sidewalks held more than a hundred men, who scowled and muttered. Deadly menace was in the very air like a heavy cloud, and the sensitive pilot's face seemed to age a bit and his eyes to gleam more coldly as they swept the nondescript groups of Mexicans, Negroes, and ragged, dirty whites.

"I'm going out and snoot around!" pattered Monty, as they got to the tiny shack that housed the mine office. "I——"

"Better be careful," warned Christy. "You know what happened to me this afternoon."

"Sure," the cocky, immaculately turned-out Mayfield said cheerily. "But they figure you're the big chief and are responsible for their wages and the closing of their joints and everything. This unknown's fixed that. Me, I'm only an also ran that's neither here nor there. And if they start trouble—they'll get it! Old Manuel'll tell me what he knows if he can do it on the sly. That was a good deal for us when I picked him out of that shaft, old-timer!"

And he went out. Russ's lips twitched as he watched him swagger down the street, ten-gallon hat on one side of his sandy head and his sharp little face as alert as a fox terrier's.

"I can't imagine their carrying through any scheme to rush the mine," Christy said slowly. "They'd be destroying their own livelihood out of pure meanness. Yet a drunken mob would do almost anything, at that."

He went on, as though in a soliloquy, and Russ glimpsed something of the epic task the

stalwart Westerner before him had accomplished. Being a stockholder, he had his own savings in the mine, and it had been a terrific battle against overwhelming odds to make it pay. Bad labor, poor transportation facilities—a thousand battles over man and nature had been won. And now it seemed to have been in vain.

He veered to savage speculation on the unknown forces that were inflaming his men against him, and suddenly broke off with:

"Gosh, I'd better be getting your 'phone call through to Marfa so that your ship can be fixed, instead of talking like an old woman."

Russ went to the door and looked out on the unlovely town below the majestic mountains. It was raw and crude—and his heart tightened at the significance of those idle groups, talking, always talking.

"Every cable running out of town has been cut, and we can't get a soul over the 'phone! They're up to some deviltry, sure enough!"

It was a veritable roar from Christy—and that second Russ was surer of himself than he had ever been before. But he said nothing to Christy, except:

"We'll come out all right. If worst comes to worst, maybe a scheme I've got'll work—if anything's due to happen."

Slim came in a moment later, remarking:

"I felt as though I were coming through a pack of wolves down there, and a knife in the back wouldn't have shocked me, even! Think I caught a glimpse of Hawley—guess he's returned to his little playmates."

It was dark—with a darkness that seemed to hold a thousand hidden, threatening eyes—when Mayfield came into the murky office, left unlighted to prevent an assassin's shot.

"I heard about the telephone wires!" he exploded. "And I know why they did it! They're planning to tear that mine limb from limb, Bob! Any time after dark—Manuel didn't know details. They're afire down there in town, the fools! The swine!"

He raved on until Russ, his body tense and his eyes flaming in the darkness, interrupted:

"We'll go out there, and if they come, maybe Slim and I can stop 'em."

He knew how desperately he was gambling—but the whole flight couldn't be brought from Marfa for this. At any moment, the most im-

portant duty of that border patrol might loom up—and somehow he was sure he was right, and that the whole flight was not needed. He hated to keep Christy in that half-crazed condition, but there was no help for it.

The mouth of the mine was in a ravine scarcely twenty feet wide, within fifty feet of the end that opened toward the town. The hills on either side of the opening sloped steeply for twenty feet, then shot straight upward in sheer cliffs extending several hundred yards on each side.

"We might hold this quite a while, with a barricade," Slim stated. "They could attack from the rear, though, after a climb. Boy, if they're coming, I hope they make it fast!"

The four of them, each armed with two guns now, were standing at the mouth of the narrow ravine. Russ, quivering in every muscle, forced his voice to steadiness as he said:

"Christy, Slim and I fooled you—for a purpose. We can fly that ship. And with our guns we can just spray the ground and kill every man jack that starts from town for this mine! And we're going to start for the ship now. You shoot three times as a signal."

"Great guns!"

Farrell's head came back as Mayfield barked those words.

"But, why——" started Christy, when Russ snapped:

"Because Slim and I thought we saw something that maybe you didn't. This afternoon when Mayfield here came——"

He was within a yard of Mayfield, and watchful as a cat, but the little fellow could move with the speed of a humming bird. In one mighty bound he leaped down the slope, and dashed into the darkness.

"We were right—and we'll get him later!" shouted Russ. "I didn't think he'd run so soon."

"Listen, Christy," he went on rapidly, his heart pounding with relief. "This afternoon we noticed Mayfield and the men. The way they looked and all. And I thought I could see an understanding there. They were like lambs. You, trusting him and all, would never suspect. But his handling of 'em—the easy way he got results—wasn't natural. So we fixed it to make him think the ship was helpless, without repair. Then he left. The telephone cable was cut, so we couldn't get any help. When I said just now

that we could fly and hold 'em back, he lit out because he knew, when I started about this afternoon, that we suspected him. And he didn't want the men to attack under the circumstances, because a lot would be killed, and someone would confess that he, Mayfield, was behind it all! He wants your job, probably. I'll bet he's promised 'em big wages and all their liquor saloons and the rest! Sorry he got away now, but we'll get him!"

Christy was overwhelmed, almost incredulous—and yet Mayfield's flight was a confession.

"Listen!" Slim interjected. "Know what I think he'll do now? I'll bet he can't hold off or control his drunken mob—I'll bet they'll attack anyway, and he'll try doggone hard to see to it that no one of us lives to tell on him! They'll probably attack the ship first—part of 'em—trusting to the dark to sneak up on Farnsworth, which they can——"

"Let's go!" shouted Russ. "And there's no need for you to stay, Christy. You can't do any good, and you'll be killed!"

They got to the ship just in time. No sooner had the motor been started than a shot rang out from the woods. There were men there who

evidently had just arrived to begin wrecking the ship. The wispy bookkeeper fled in the darkness, promising to hide until events were over, and in wild haste the other three piled in—Slim and Christy in the rear seat. As the Douglas roared its battle song across the field, spots of fire flared in the woods, and Russ thought thankfully:

"In another two minutes, maybe, they'd have sneaked up and knocked this ship into Kingdom Come!"

The right wing was vibrating greatly, but the break was so far toward the end that Russ felt sure the wing would hold—and even if it didn't, he could bring the ship down. There was no landing field, anyway, save the one they had left. Taut and rigid, eyes flaring with battle light, he roared across the town to hold the mine for the man he'd come to admire so strongly. He knew that Slim was tapping the radio key and calling help that would arrive from Marfa in a half hour or less. He cursed himself for his stupidity in letting Mayfield escape—the little rat had made his break a bit sooner than he had expected. Had they captured him, the rest would have been easy, without help. Mayfield had been

trying to maintain to the last his bluff of being loyal—probably would have slipped away when the fight started.

The ship was vibrating terribly as they roared across the town. Russ had his landing searchlights, set in each lower wing, turned on, and he could see that wing tip bending badly beneath the strain. If it went, he'd have to come down. The ship couldn't be controlled with that lifting surface gone from one side.

There they were! More than a hundred and fifty men, he judged, clogging the road which led to the mine. With the searchlights gleaming like great eyes, he nosed down. He was flying at right angles to them, and he pointed about a hundred yards ahead of the motley horde standing out in the lights. They stopped in a milling mass, and his guns spit fire. The rain of bullets fairly plowed up the ground ahead of them. That would make it clear to them where they'd be if they kept on. If that wing would only hold for half an hour until the other ships came, one of them could hold the mine while the other flyers landed and rounded up Mayfield and the rest under the protection of the ship in the air.

But it didn't. For ten torturing minutes, while the stick grew harder and harder to handle and the ship reared and plunged, right wing always drooping, he fought it. Then the weakened wing tip folded back, and the ship flipped into a left bank.

Russ knew what he must do, and he settled down to the flying of his life. The men were still huddled down there, a few hundred yards from the mine mouth.

Two hundred feet high, Russ pointed at right angles to the ravine. But the left bank, from which it was impossible to pull the ship, carried him around, the motor idling softly. Handling throttle, rudder, and stick skilfully, he flew so that, as the hills guarding the entrance of the gully loomed before him, the ship was turning squarely between them. He cut the ignition, and in the sudden darkness he pulled desperately on the stick. The ship answered—the nose came up—and at an angle of forty-five degrees upward the wings mushed into the slopes on either side.

The fuselage fell the few feet into the narrow gulley, the force of it broken by the wings. The ominous sounds of rending linen and wood and

clashing metal suggested that the end had come —but three bloody passengers, only slightly hurt, emerged from the tangle of wood and linen and wire.

"Great work!" gasped Slim. "But——"

"Those rear guns'll work—let's get 'em set up!" panted Russ, wiping the blood from his face.

It was but the effort of a moment to detach the free-swinging double Lewis from its scarf-mount around the rear cockpit, and then they had machine guns defending the narrow opening.

"Fire one to let 'em know!" suggested the dazed Christy, and for a few seconds the deadly rat-a-tat-tat carried the message to the outlaws.

"Now, if they don't climb up over the hill and get us from the rear, for the next few minutes, all's well!" Slim remarked. "It's sure been a nice evening, hasn't it?"

And Russ, grinning widely, agreed.

Twenty minutes of taut suspense, wondering whether a rear attack would—could—be made so soon with that cliff to get over, and then, from afar, the welcome roar of the coming 'planes reverberated from the hills. Three of them,

lights blazing—and the crowd scattered like so many fleeing rabbits. Their bolt was shot.

A half hour later, two ships went roaring down the trail to Presidio, which is on the border, and ten miles out brought a fleeing car to a stop with their guns. Marking the spot by circling, Tex MacDowell stayed, while Jimmy Jennings flew back and told the news. The pursuing car, with Christy in it, started out, and came back with both Mayfield and Hawley. Mayfield's bravado gone, he confessed freely and begged for mercy, but Christy himself took both the trouble instigator and his willing tool to El Paso jail next day.

The flyers, however, left that night. Something might turn up along the border. Russ and Slim rode as extra passengers in two of the ships.

"The crowd'll be like lambs now," Christy assured the flyers. "No need to stay, Slim, thanks. And, Russ——"

His big palm crushed the young pilot's hand in a mighty grip, and his eyes were suspiciously bright as he said huskily:

"It's cost the government a ship to save me, and you—did plenty. If I live, I'll pay you boys back for it—but thanks is all I can say now."

"That's plenty—more than enough," Russ told him, grinning happily. And he meant it. To the rangy pilot, just the privilege of being a border patrolman was reward enough for any man, and he would have traded his lot for none in the world, as he saw the field at Marfa come into view like a golden pool of light at the foot of the mountains.

They landed, taxied to the line, and ran out the motor after cutting off the gas flow. There was a knot of flyers on the porch of headquarters.

"Looks to be a consultation," Russ remarked. "Guess I'll run over and see if anything's up."

Kennard was talking, and as Russ, in the lead, joined the group, the Captain smiled at him grimly.

"Just in time to hear the news," he stated. "Your friend Blackie Williams escaped from jail to-day, is headed for the border, they think —and I suppose we've got to fly more'n ever. No rest for the weary!"

"Huh?" gulped Russ.

"A couple of huhs," grated Kennard. "It's tough luck in a couple of ways. If he gets away, the information that they might worm out of him by wearing him down will never be got,

for one thing. Second, there isn't a hombre on earth I'd hate to have loose, making bad medicine for us, more than that same devil!"

"Well," Slim Evans remarked, "it evidently shows one thing—that this gang has helpers just about everywhere. Somebody must have helped Williams from the outside. Gosh, their men spring up from everywhere—Tony Norton rolls in, Blackie just appears out of thin air, those guys that got Graves and Humphreys that time—you never know."

"We've got a new man coming, thank God," Benson said. "Regular army flyer this time."

"Named Dudley Garvice," nodded the Captain. "I'll be glad to see him. We'll need help, maybe, with Blackie Williams loose!"

CHAPTER V

THE DETONATION OF THE DUD

"HIS name is Dudley, they call him Dud, and he's the most perfectly named misfit who ever hit the only tree in sight when he tried to land!" Fred Ridgeway stated, and his lean face was even more saturnine than usual. It was the following day, and Ridgeway had just learned the identity of the expected flyer.

Farrell smothered a yawn as he removed his eyes from the big, sandy airdrome, and the towering mountains, and focused them on the tall master pilot.

"You speak with considerable heat," the big red-head remarked. "Why did they order him down here, of all places?"

"If you weren't woozy from flying half the night, you wouldn't be asking," stated dark-haired Jimmy Jennings. "That's what Fred's been beefing about for a half hour."

"Of course!" Ridgeway exploded. "Here we're the Marfa flight of the border patrol. Which means what? It means we've got the worst country on the whole river to fly over. And what else does it mean?"

"Well," Russ said, "it means that we've got the most important sector of the border to watch, as far as these flying smugglers are concerned, and——"

"Exactly!" Ridgeway interrupted. "And they're sending the worst flyer in the Army Air Service down here. He shouldn't be a flyer—wouldn't be, if he'd learned as a cadet instead of a transferred officer! He's spent more than half of the last five years in a hospital. He can't fly, and I know it because I tried to teach him. He never ought to try. He's a good little egg, in a way, but he hasn't sense enough to get out—and he'll never be anything but a butter-fingered dud in a ship! Yet the powers that be order him here!"

Russ was suddenly conscious of keen sympathy for the unknown Lieutenant Dudley Garvice whom he was to fly back from Donovan Field that very day. He could understand why a man might fairly ache to fly, because he himself

was still as enamored of the game as he had been during the years when he'd dreamed of flying without believing that he ever could. Funny to see the usually calm Ridgeway get so wrought up.

"I tried my blamedest to get him out when he was learning!" Ridgeway went on. "I suppose he still hates me for that, but I can't help it. I was trying to do him a favor. And I still maintain, if he's bound to commit suicide, he could do it easier with a gun or a buzz saw than with a 'plane."

"A little news, boys."

Captain Kennard emerged from the door of headquarters, and the half-dozen khaki-clad airmen lounging on the steps in the comparative cool of the early morning snapped into attitudes of eager attention. Any moment might bring an eagerly awaited, half-dreaded climax.

"I've sent the orderly after everybody else that's awake," Kennard stated. "Here they come."

Four more airmen came to the steps, appearing from sleeping tents and hangars.

"Long radiogram from Graves in San Antonio, boys," the stubby, brush-pompadoured

commanding officer told them. "It speaks for itself. Listen:

"Last night man known as Fellucci, whom we believe important factor in organization of smugglers we are after, escaped just before our men arrived to arrest him. We cannot account for his knowledge of our suspicions of him, as we had never seen him and had kept our operations under cover. Convinced that his capture will give me key to whole business. He has not crossed border. Only information we have is that he escaped into mesquite, riding huge spotted brown and white stallion. He is tall, thin, powerful man of forty, only particularly distinguishing mark being gold tooth in his upper jaw slightly to right of center teeth. Convinced he is hiding in mountains, waiting chance to cross border. Cavalry, immigration officers, and rangers all notified. On all patrols keep sharp watch for lone rider on spotted horse, and you will make additional patrols covering mountain district for space of twenty miles north of river between Marfa and Sierra Blanca. Williams might join him.

GRAVES."

"So somebody actually slipped Graves!" chuckled big Tex MacDowell. "Say, I'd figured that quiet-voiced bird infallible. I'd rather have a wounded grizzly, a bloodhound, and a tribe of cannibals on my trail than him."

That was Russ's feeling exactly. So ground men had sleuthed around until they'd come to this unknown man, had they—and then he'd slipped them! Well, Blackie Williams and Tony

Norton, the only two avowed members of the huge conspiracy with whom Russ had come in contact had been far from ordinary men, and doubtless Fellucci was no different.

"It means double flying," Kennard pointed out. "Russ, you'd better get right off for Donovan, get that new ship and—that's right. We've got a new flyer coming. That'll help some."

"You don't know Dud Garvice, do you?" inquired Ridgeway, that twist of mockery on his lips.

"I've heard something about him this morning," Kennard nodded. "Well, anything's better than nothing, and when a flight's flying night and day as we are, it can't stand much more without help!"

That was the truth, thought Russ, as a few minutes later he was heading his two-ton Douglas over the limitless mesquite on its way toward San Antonio. He could barely keep awake under the numbing roar of the twelve-cylinder Liberty.

Two hours over billowing chaparral, then open country, and finally San Antonio, with the two-mile-square expanse of Donovan Field four miles southwest of it. There was his ship, he'd

bet, standing ready in front of hangar eleven. He hoped that coot Dud Garvice would be ready, too. Couldn't waste time at Donovan, with double patrol to be done. He wondered whether that would put the kibosh on the flying circus that the Marfa flight, along with the El Paso airmen, was scheduled to give a few days later at Fort Bliss. Benefit of some hospital or something. He didn't care either way, although a night in an El Paso hotel wouldn't be bad.

Time to land. He leveled out of the dive three feet above the ground, and as the ship slowed and came to that second when flying speed is almost but not quite gone, he jerked back on the stick. The ship landed as lightly as a feather, and he whirled it rapidly with the rudder and gave it slight gun long before it had stopped rolling. As it trundled toward the line, he saw one mechanic standing there, and beside him a small figure in officer's boots. No one else—it was lunch time.

The mechanic met him as he climbed out of the ship.

"Your receipt for the old ship, and will the lieutenant please sign for the new one?" he said, and in a second the business was over.

As the mechanic went away the little officer came up to Russ hesitantly.

"Lieutenant Russ Farrell?" he asked, and Russ nodded and grinned.

"Sure—and this is Garvice, I suppose. Glad to know you. Hop in—we've got a lot of work to do down on the border."

As he shook hands, he was looking Garvice over with considerable interest. He was so small, Russ could have worn him as a watch charm, to use his own expression, and his attire was immaculate from polished boots to shiny leather helmet. His scarred face—which had been smashed and reconstructed by air service doctors—was thin and eager, features regular, gray eyes very bright. They fairly glittered, as though Garvice were under a constant, exciting strain. And yet Russ felt instinctively that, way in the back of them, there was a bewildered expression—as though the man were almost licked and didn't quite know why.

"Listen," Russ told him. "I'll take off and get over the S.P. tracks. Then I'm going to hand her over to you, and you just follow the tracks into Marfa. I'll wake up before then—but I'm going to sleep a while!"

The little pilot nodded eagerly. Certainly was a nice-looking, nice-acting little fellow, Russ was thinking. His movements were quick—he was like a darting humming bird as he climbed into the front cockpit, fumbled around, and finally had to ask Russ how to start the ship.

"Never flew a Douglas before," he said shamefacedly.

"Well, that's nothing to worry about," Russ told him. "They're a cinch."

He was trying to be extra nice to the newcomer. If there was anything that Russ could thoroughly understand, it was a consuming desire to be a good flyer; and if there was anything he admired and liked, it was a fighter. Somehow the battered little newcomer appealed mightily to him.

Five minutes later, a thousand feet above the flashing lines of steel that led into Marfa, three hundred miles away, Russ handed the control of the ship to Garvice, and within a moment the bellowing roar of the Liberty had lulled the tired red-head into the sleep of exhaustion.

Possibly it was the sixth sense of the out-of-doors man that awakened him forty-five minutes later. He looked down through sleep-dulled

eyes, and in an instant his big body was taut and his blue eyes narrowed. They weren't over the S.P. tracks.

Then, fortunately, a ranch house which he recognized, off to the west, got him orientated. They were off on a tiny, disused branch line. Garvice had followed that instead of the main line.

"And how the deuce anyone could be so dumb, *I* don't know!" the fiery Farrell raved.

He grabbed the stick and jammed the 'plane around viciously. Have to cut straight across now until they hit the main tracks. Probably lose just enough time to make it necessary to land at Del Rio or Sanderson for gas. He turned around and glared at Garvice.

The little fellow was sitting bolt upright, and in his eyes there was a look that was somehow tragic. In an instant, the soft-hearted Russ comprehended what had happened—Garvice had debated which track to take when they branched, hadn't wanted to wake Russ up, and had chosen the wrong one. Now, humiliated and ashamed in the knowledge that he had "pulled a bone" on his first assignment, he was "feeling like the hospital again," to use Russ's expression.

And Russ forgot his wrath and forced himself to grin and point ahead. Then he gave the stick to Garvice again, and settled back as though to sleep once more.

He did, after he'd seen to it that Garvice was on the right course, and he did not awaken until they were within a half hour of Marfa. As the towering hills passed below the Douglas, and that deadly, cañon-split country lay spread in familiar, menacing desolation below, Russ's mind was swerved inevitably back to the problem of the patrol. So the end was near, was it, and they had to scout around for this Fellucci fellow who held the key in his hand. Well, it was about time. Blackie Williams, insouciant and impudent as ever, had refused to talk when in jail; and Tony Norton, very ill, would be in the hospital for months. And he would never talk—Russ was sure of that.

The 'plane shot across the line of hills ahead, and there was the airdrome, at the foot of the mountains. Russ pointed downward, and Garvice started to spiral the huge ship. A ragged spiral, it turned out to be. The bank was shallow one moment, too steep the next, and the downward angle of the ship changed constantly

under the nervous hand of the midget in the back seat.

"Nervous—bad overcontrol," Russ thought.

Garvice started his dive for the landing a good distance back from the huge field, using his motor in spasmodic bursts. As he hit the edge, he was going at least a hundred and thirty miles an hour. He cut the gun all the way, and skimmed the ground. He tried to land too soon by pulling back on the stick, and the ship zoomed slightly. He caught it quickly, and nosed down again. This time he waited too long. From four feet the ship fell from beneath him, and bounced ten feet in the air, nose up.

In an instant Russ, conscious of the watchers near headquarters, had thrust on the gun and grabbed the stick. Not quite soon enough—another tremendous bounce. Finally, he brought it down, but he had used all but fifty feet or so of the available landing space.

"He *sure* can't fly," Farrell thought, and somehow there was a disappointed feeling within him. He wanted the little fellow to make good.

They walked over to headquarters together,

and Fred Ridgeway, seated on the steps along with three others, greeted them from afar.

"Hi, Dud. That looked like one of your landings!"

Russ glanced quickly at Garvice's battered countenance. There was a determined smile on it, but——

"I did the bouncing!" Farrell said disgustedly. He had bounced the last time, although, of course, it had not been his fault.

He did not look at Garvice as Ridgeway introduced him to the others.

"Well, how did you get down in this country?" Ridgeway asked. "They must want to get rid of you quick—no more hospitals, but finish the job!"

Russ flushed with resentment. He'd never have thought that of Ridgeway—that he'd razz a newcomer so cruelly.

"And I'd have bet my month's pay," Ridgeway pursued, "that you, Dud, were handling the ship on that landing. It took me back to the old days."

"I was!"

Garvice's words were like the crack of a

whip, and his shoulders came back and his bright, beaten eyes roved defiantly around the circle. "Farrell was just trying to take the blame, that's all!"

"I thought so!" nodded Ridgeway. "Dud, you ought to get out of this business. You can't fly a kite, and never'll be able to. Haven't you knocked yourself around enough? You're——"

"What business is it of yours?" blazed Farrell. "I suppose you never bounced—oh, no! Not the great Fred Ridgeway! Come on, Dud. We'll see where you sleep."

"Don't mind 'em," he went on as they walked away. "Of course, he didn't mean it——"

"The deuce he didn't!" Garvice said quietly. "He knows me. And he's always been sore because I kept on flying. But I'm going to be a real flyer or bust!"

His short, spike-like blond pompadour seemed to bristle belligerently. Seen without his helmet, that hair of his made him look even more ludicrous than before. And yet his determined cheerfulness was pitiful, somehow. At the door of his tent, he told Russ:

"Thanks for taking the blame of that landing, Farrell. But I'm not asking for anything

like that. It was sort of tough to break in on the border with a rotten landing—but it was my fault and I wanted 'em to know it."

That bad landing, however, was not the only thing he did to prove the accuracy of Ridgeway's judgment. Not a day passed without flying mistakes on his part. Despite their advice about the light air and the need of fast landings, practically every landing was a fearful and wonderful thing to behold. He got lost twice in five days. He blew three tires during that length of time, and once barely escaped cracking up two ships on the line when his got away from him. During the formation practice, preparing for the flying circus, his air work was so bad that he broke the entire formation up several times, and finally was left out of it entirely.

Every new mistake was a signal for a half-humorous, half-serious onslaught by Fred Ridgeway. And Slim Evans and Jimmy Jennings helped along with the stinging kidding.

It grew more and more serious as tense days went by. Russ kept his mouth shut by main force of will, and contented himself with spending considerable time with Garvice and trying to encourage and help him. But the big red-head,

like the others, was commencing to feel the strain, and his nerves were on edge. Each pilot was spending more than four hours a day in the air, half at night and half in the daytime. And every moment of that time held the most severe strain known to flying, for motor failure when a man was flying over that terrible country would probably mean maiming—or death. Then they had to be constantly watchful for ominous events on the ground. Added to it all was the ever-growing tautness born of the knowledge that sooner or later a climax was bound to come. As they watched and waited and flew themselves into exhaustion, it was no wonder that the little group of flyers became nervous and fidgety and uncertain of temper.

It seemed as if more than half of them took it out on Dud Garvice. His every mistake brought a blazing reprimand. The little fellow, never licked, took it with that tragic, bewildered look in his eyes, and never resented it. He was like a disreputable, battered little sparrow, killing himself in an endeavor to keep up with scornful eagles.

And Russ, warm-hearted and sensitive, writhed in torture as he watched—could not

understand. What had got into Fred, and Slim, and Jimmy—even into Captain Kennard and Tex MacDowell, at times? Russ knew his weakness, his tendency to flare into blazing resentment, and strove to control himself. It became ever harder to do so, however, and his nerves became so strained that his sleep was broken badly and the days were nightmares, wracking suspense.

So things went until only two days were left before the date of the circus, and still Fellucci had not been seen or heard of. And another radiogram came through. Ranger Hilton, on a secret mission back in the mountains, had never reached his objective and had disappeared. No ranger disappears without important consequences resulting therefrom; nevertheless, as the flight received orders to look for him, too, it seemed that duty was becoming too severe. Only a few ships and a few flyers, already worked to the limit——

And Dud chose that day to have his motor cut out just as he was leaving the field. As he made his forced landing, he underestimated his distance, sideslipped too steeply—and did not have altitude enough to get back in the air-

drome when he leveled off. He crashed his ship badly in a ditch just outside the field—and there was one Douglas less for the Marfa flight.

It happened just before lunch. At the meal Ridgeway started on him, and the others, haggard-faced and jumpy, did their share. Garvice sat silently and took it all, while Russ's face whitened and his blue eyes began to blaze.

"It comes down to this, Garvice!" Ridgeway said finally. "You're a hopeless boob at flying. Some day you'll kill yourself. Or you'll kill a passenger—and, by the mighty, if you do, you'll be a murderer as surely as though you'd pulled a gun on him. Why don't you get some sense and get out?"

"None of your dirty business!" came a hysterical shout, and Garvice was on his feet. He was crouching, as though to spring on his enemies, and there was a maniacal blaze in his eyes.

Half crying, he talked in wild, incoherent phrases that fairly tumbled from his mouth. He cursed them all, called Ridgeway every name he could think of, warned them.

"Lay off me, Ridgeway, and every one of you,

or you'll wish you had!" he raved. "I don't care what you think—what any of you think, and if you don't keep your mouths shut, I'll——"

"And I'll help you!"

It was Russ, his body quivering with rage and his blue eyes afire with almost crazed fury. The table was silent as the grave, and somehow Ridgeway, particularly, seemed to be utterly taken aback.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, the whole bunch of you!" Russ shouted wildly. "Especially you, Fred. I thought you were a friend of mine, but it's taken me until now to learn what a small-time, shrew-tongued bully you are! I don't want anything more to do with you! Understand?

"A fine gang you are, all of you! Picking on a poor little kid like a bunch of wolves on a rabbit. Yes, you, Evans, and Jennings, and all the rest. I haven't any use for a one of you. And I'll be tickled to death to knock your contemptible heads off, one by one, if you'll be man enough to pick on somebody your size for a change!"

The long strain had made him a human tor-

nado, for the moment, and as he stood there lashing them with his tongue, he was a hundred and eighty pounds of steel and flame.

"Russ is right!" came Captain Kennard's voice. "We all——"

"You're right I'm right!" exploded Russ, his blue eyes like living coals. Garvice, kicking back his chair, had backed away from the table, and there were tears—probably of rage—in his blazing eyes.

"I apologize," Ridgeway said slowly, and his face was very white. "The reason——"

"Take your apology and throw it in the river!" spat Russ, and he, too, backed away from the table. "And the farther you keep away from me, the better I'll like it!"

He whirled and walked rapidly out of the mess hall.

"Russ, be yourself!" came a voice from the table. "It's all right——"

But Russ did not wait, and Garvice followed him out. For the moment, the fiery red-head was in no condition to talk to anyone, and he escaped into his tent and did not emerge until his patrol, from three to five.

At supper that night, he was silent and dis-

traught, as was Garvice. Russ did not make a move toward backing down; nor did anyone else refer to the events at lunch. It was an ill-at-ease group who tried their best to act naturally, but could not in the presence of Garvice and his champion.

Russ flew again that night, while the searchlights pierced the darkness, and the Big Bend was a great mass of shadow. Down there in the river he knew that the cavalry and all other forces of the law were watching like hawks to see that neither Fellucci nor anyone else escaped their net. If only something would happen! Russ was thinking. Fellucci seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth—as had the ranger. A dozen men with gold teeth had been put to considerable inconvenience up and down the border—but Fellucci was still at large. Somewhere in those shadowed depths below, he, along with dozens of other outlaws, was hiding. And the ranger, probably, was lying dead—perhaps at Fellucci's hands. Who could tell?

Russ slept until it was almost time to start for El Paso. It would take only about five hours to get the whole trip over with—and there being another flight of the patrol at Fort Bliss,

any radio message would reach them there as well as at Marfa. None of the flyers had referred to the battle in the mess hall, but Russ, keeping strictly to himself, knew that not a word more had been said to Garvice. Dud, shoulders back and pompadour bristling belligerently, was as always—except that he, too, refused even to talk unless directly addressed, and then his answer was sharp and terse. A shadow hung over the flight, and even the meals were periods of uncomfortable, tense silence.

At one o'clock they started—seven great Douglases, roaring their mighty chorus as they shot over the mountains—and finally saw, ahead and below, the vast expanse of the Fort Bliss parade ground outside of El Paso.

Their first exhibition, formation flying, was scheduled to take place before they landed. Solid lines of cars formed a black border for the field, and thousands of faces were upturned toward the sky as the Fort Bliss ships landed and Captain Kennard, at the head of his V of ships, led the Marfa formation downward.

It was wonderful flying that was done that day, with those seven master flyers at the sticks. At a hundred and twenty miles an hour, only

twenty-five feet behind and ten above the ship next ahead, those two-ton 'planes ever held their places. Russ, flying in last position on the right-hand side, never took his left hand from the throttle. There are no brakes on an airplane—and two tons speeding at two miles a minute is no easy thing to handle accurately. One has literally to sense any difference in speed of the ship ahead, before it actually slows up, and compensate for it with the throttle.

Kennard led them down in great spirals—the ships on the inside of the turn throttled to the limit, those on the outside almost wide open—and never a ship lost place. For a finale the formation headed directly across the field, a hundred feet high. Rocking up and down in the air bumps, speeding almost wide open, now, the formation thundered above the great field while the thousands on the sidelines cheered the majestic sight.

At the end of the field they made a wide turn, and landed in formation, spreading slightly so that there would be no collisions. And when the ships stopped rolling on the ground, they were still in formation.

Three scouts from Donovan Field were just

ready to take to the air for some stunting. Later, both Fort Bliss and Marfa ships would go up together, for some tricky maneuvering. For the present, though, the observation 'planes had a rest. Down at the other end was the somewhat battered 'plane in which Garvice had flown down—the best 'planes, of course, had been picked for the circus work, and Garvice was not in any of the stunts. He was just there to look on. Beside Garvice's 'plane was a De Haviland that a Fort Bliss flyer had just left.

Russ had just alighted from his ship at the far end of the line, and Benson, his observer, had started down the line, when a tall, wiry, gray-headed man in ordinary clothing topped off with a small gray Stetson, came up. His white teeth flashed across his dark face as he smiled and asked:

"Lieutenant Farrell?"

Russ nodded.

"I'm Gray, of the Rangers," the stranger stated gently, and his dark eyes were looking straight into Russ's as he showed his badge. "I'd appreciate a ride in one of these things, and from what I've heard I'd as soon ride with you as anyone. How about it?"

Russ grinned a bit, and the lines that had grown deeper in the last few days curved around his mouth. Any ranger was worthy of special attention and courtesy.

"If Captain Kennard is willing," he stated. "I'll see him."

The Captain was.

"Better take him now while we're not busy," he said. "Ten minutes or so. Keep away from the field, of course, and don't be late."

"I'll take Garvice's 'plane," Russ suggested, "and not muss up our formation."

Five minutes later, after the scouts had taken off, Russ was taxi-ing out on the field and taking off. He circled widely twice, to get altitude, and then went north. He'd keep within gliding distance of the field at all times——

Something dug him in the back. He turned, and his big body stiffened and his eyes widened. The lean-faced stranger was bending toward him, his right hand holding the gun that had dug Russ in the back. With his left he handed Russ a folded slip of paper.

Russ was in a daze. Suddenly, a terrific bump caught the ship, as a gust of wind, at the same time, threw it sideward. Russ caught it sharply

with the stick, and then his eyes froze to the note.

I am Fellucci, whom you seek. I have Ranger Hilton's badge. Fly me a few miles into Mexico, land, and you will return safely. I am familiar with airplanes. I can handle one in the air, if necessary. Fail to obey me to the letter, and you will be shot without mercy and I will fly myself and chance making a landing without killing myself. I am desperate; so do not trifle. Start immediately.

Russ's red head turned slowly and his eyes glared into Fellucci's. This was the man they sought—the man who was most important of all right then——

But where was his gold tooth? A wolfish smile was exposing his teeth now—and they were white and perfect. Well, no use thinking of that —and he, Russ Farrell, was going to have to fly the man for whom thousands were looking, and help him to escape forever across the border.

Another bump hit the ship, and he nosed forward slightly as the gun dug into him again. The nose settled back slowly—it hadn't answered the stick. In utter astonishment, Russ pulled back slightly. The ship did not answer. His face suddenly white as chalk, he moved the

stick while he looked back. The elevators did not move!

The ailerons were all right, but somewhere, in the controls between stick and elevators of that somewhat battered 'plane, something had gone wrong. The ship, by chance, was so rigged that it would fly level of itself, with the motor turning up fifteen hundred as it was, but at any moment the nose might begin to settle, and there was no way of pulling it out of a dive, or landing it. He must take to his seat-pack parachute.

But Fellucci had none. He'd have to leave him in the 'plane to die, as the ship, after it ran out of gas, went into its final drop to the earth.

Then there came into his numbed mind two thoughts. One was a million-to-one chance of coming out safely. The other was that there, in the back seat, was the assassinator of Ranger Hilton—and the man who could furnish the government the information necessary to break up the gigantic criminal ring that was costing the country so dear.

For a long fifteen seconds, the pale young pilot fought his battle, that gun prodding into his side. It was sure death for him—no, he'd

have a chance in a million. And on that chance he must rely. He was a border patrolman.

But cold sweat was breaking out on him, and death was brushing him with its wings as he wrote quickly, on the pad provided for patrol notes:

The elevators have gone bad. Watch me move the stick, and see. I have a parachute. You take your choice. There's a possible chance of my bringing the ship down. Take the parachute and jump. Or I'll jump and leave you alone. If you jump, you must jump over the field! Your gun means nothing, now!

He passed it back, and then glanced briefly downward. Below were thousands, thousands who could not know what was taking place up there in the air—he was utterly alone, and life had never seemed so sweet.

He turned, and even in his situation he had to admire the iron composure of Fellucci. Pale, but steady, the outlaw watched—stick moving, with no answer from the ship. Then, because turning off the motor would be suicidal, another note came forward.

You are a very great man. Not for myself, but for my work, I take the parachute. Saluté!

But Russ was not through. To give his life for Fellucci's safety alone was not part of his plan. With infinite care, he banked—a long, shallow bank, and with the throttle slightly advanced he kept the ship level in it, and out of a dive that doubtless would be fatal. Another note was written when they were headed for the field, and wrapped around a wrench. It told the men on the ground the whole truth—and ended:

Clear the field. I'll try with my stabilizers, but the ship may be out of control and go into the crowd.

He dropped it, and when he saw it picked up and read, and the wildly milling crowd pointing upward, he unsnapped his seat-pack parachute and passed it back. Another slow, heartbreaking circle, during which, twice, he barely caught the ship out of an incipient dive by turning the motor full on—and he was over the field again. They weren't clearing it—what was the trouble? But he could not bother about that while he lived this terrible nightmare. Death, in some sudden, flaming emergency, was not so bad. But to sit and wait for the inevitable—it was gradually driving him crazy.

He turned and nodded. White-faced, but composed, Fellucci stood in his seat, saluted theatrically, and pulled the ripcord. In a second he was whipped out and floating downward.

The tortured Russ watched—saw him land and saw him surrounded and captured. Why weren't the crowd being shooed entirely off the field? What was that ship taking off for? Were they crazy?

But he must not waste time. He must try it out now. Perhaps that perfectly rigged ship would do it, but it would be miraculous if he lived.

Never had he done a thing so hard as to draw back on the throttle. The heavy nose settled. Quickly the motor went on—with maddening slowness the ship came level. It answered, then —now for the experiment that might give him a bare chance for life.

This time, half crazed as he waited, he turned the motor all the way off. The nose dropped swiftly—a fairly steep dive——

The motor went full on, and at the same time he turned the wheel that worked the adjustable

stabilizer in the rear, changing its angle slightly. It was adjustable to make the ship either tail-heavy or the reverse, to compensate for whatever load it carried, but its range of adjustment was very, very small.

Unbearably tense, his face a drawn white mask, and his eyes flaming with something very like madness, he felt that terrific dive continue. It wouldn't come out—he was as good as dead now——

But it did. With torturing slowness, going nearly two hundred miles an hour, the ship answered. Finally, limp in his seat, Russ knew it was level, and he adjusted the motor and stabilizer again. But there was no way under heaven by which he could calculate so closely as to bring the ship out of a dive close enough to the ground to save himself. Fifty feet too high would mean death—just six inches too low, the same. But he must try—why didn't they clear that field, the fools! Wouldn't they give him even his slim chance for life?

Then, as he turned to go 'way north for that wild dive at the field, he saw a ship coming toward him—the De Haviland. And suddenly

Russ shouted like a wild man, and he found himself crying hysterically. Just for a moment—then he got control of himself.

Clinging to the undercarriage of the 'plane was Dud Garvice. His ankles were tied over the spreader-bar between the wheels, and beneath him was a parachute. As the ship, with Tex MacDowell at the stick, started maneuvering to get above Russ, little Dud, the 'chute clasped in his arms, literally fell off the spreader bar, and was hanging, head down, by his lashed ankles.

It was an eternity—the minute that followed. Flying, almost super-perfect, was needed—and Dud Garvice, head down, was trusting his life to another. The slightest mistake, and the helpless youngster would be carved to pieces by Farrell's propeller, just a few feet ahead. And he must get so terribly close!

Good judges said there was no better flyer in the world than Tex MacDowell, and there he proved it. Hovering above the pilot whose anguished face looked up from below, the D.H. settled gradually. The 'chute was suspended from Dud's hands, now, and the little fellow looked to be nearly unconscious from the strain

of the upside-down position. Closer and closer, coming from slightly behind—now he was over Russ, but too high.

But the 'chute was weighted, and there was a string on it. Russ yelled with joy as it tumbled three feet toward him. Careless of his ship, he unstrapped his belt, and stood up, reaching for his chance for life. He got it—and Dud let go.

As Russ, hysterically happy, babbled his relief to himself, he saw Dud struggle weakly to lift himself to the undercarriage. He did, finally, and lay there, exhausted. Three minutes later, back of the field, over rough country, Russ turned off the motor, and with a happy good-bye to his ship, left it. He saw it crash in the woods and catch fire—then he devoted himself to slipping his 'chute to make the airdrome. He did, while thousands of people went wild. He could see Dud being slapped on the back, the center of an admiring throng. As he came closer, he saw that he, too, was going to be mobbed.

Which he was. He had barely touched the ground before a seething maelstrom of men and women had him. It was fifteen minutes before he could extract the news: that Dud had gen-

erated the idea for saving Russ, and insisted on doing it himself; that Fellucci was safe in jail and had promised to tell all he knew because of the great amount of evidence Graves already had on him. He hadn't killed Hilton—had merely captured him and left him tied in the mountains. He had been planning to inform the other rangers, from Mexico, where he had left Hilton.

"What about that gold tooth, though?" Russ asked the flyers, and Ridgeway grinned:

"Shows how smart he was. It was an artificial shell, for a blind. He could take it off any time. He didn't dare chance making the border on the ground—he'd have had to pass through sections where everybody knows all the rangers. Nervy bozo, to pull what he did right in a crowd!"

Without any words about the subject, Russ found himself one of the gang again, as though that bitter scene in the mess hall had never happened. It seemed like a dream, somehow. It wasn't until the flight was gathered, back at Marfa, that the happy, transfigured Dud Garvice, a flying hero for once, came up to Russ and Captain Kennard as they talked in front of headquarters beneath the glowing stars. With

Garvice was Ridgeway, and after a minute or so of casual surmise as to whether their duty on the border was almost done, Fred said quietly:

"Russ, I apologize again—as I have to Dud here. I guess you'll take it now—we all feel better. And the fact that we've got Fellucci relieves the strain. I—and the other boys—were razzing Dud to save him—get him out of the army to keep him from killing himself. To get him, at least, to transfer off the border, where he was more likely than anywhere else to get bumped off.

"We did it too nastily, I know. Went too far. Lost our common sense. It was partly because we were all worked up and overwrought and going crazy with the strain, I guess. But Dud understands—and I guess you do."

"Sure, Fred. I take it all back. I didn't have too much sense myself."

"And Dud's just got some," laughed Ridgeway, his mocking self again.

"Yep!" stated Dud. "I've done something to sort of justify my wings now—and I'm satisfied. I've got some money, and I'm getting out, Russ. And getting out happy! I'll never be a flyer but, by gum, I'm the best little public accountant

you ever saw, and I've got a good job waiting. And——"

Here the battered, cocky little flyer drew himself up, as he said:

"I get out, by the mighty, as co-hero with Russ Farrell, and as a border patrolman—don't forget that!"

"That's the truth, youngster," Ridgeway exclaimed, his eyes softening curiously. "I'll tell the world you're the Dud that detonated, and did it right!"

CHAPTER VI

SAND

RUSS had his head thrust out of the cockpit of his ship straining his eyes as he peered through the light clouds of sand that obscured his view of the ground, five thousand feet below. It wasn't pleasant to expose his freckled face to the whirling grains that stung and cut it. Although the terrific wind had subsided somewhat, great streamers of sand still floated and eddied through the air.

It had certainly been a big breeze—a veritable cyclone. Thunder and lightning and terrific rain first, last night; then the sun and the sandstorm. It hadn't been much of a surprise to the Marfa flight of the border patrol to receive a call for help, although the needs of Graham, toward which he was headed, had been surprising.

There was Graham close ahead—must be. A

tiny settlement high in the hills of the Big Bend country, it looked like a series of small, light growths on the side of a mountain, near its crest.

"Certainly is an open-air location," Russ thought, conscious of great relief that he had found the village. It was seventy-five miles northwest of Marfa, and possessed no railroad whatever as a guide to it.

He peered down at the windy trail that writhed its way through the mountain toward the village. That must be some road to travel —sheer cliffs fell away from it on one side, and equally steep slopes shot upward on the other. The traces of the storm were manifest—trees uprooted across the road, others uprooted in the forest, and here and there huge boulders seemed to have found new locations. The wind was still bending the chaparral below.

"There's the landslide!" Russ told himself.

It was, without mistake. And men were working, trying to clear it, but they'd have a long job. For a solid quarter mile that narrow trail, which was the only approach to Graham, was completely lost to sight. It looked as though half the mountain side above it had simply toppled

down and inundated the tiny white ribbon of trail.

The man who had telephoned Marfa hadn't exaggerated, then. The town itself, however—a former mining camp, now practically abandoned, that housed some three hundred souls—didn't seem to show the terrific damage that must have been inflicted on it, if their messenger had told the truth. The man had had a long ride to the ranch telephone, because all wires were down from Graham, and the town practically marooned until that landslide was cleared away. Of course, others could make the forty-mile horseback ride as the messenger had, but getting supplies in on pack horses through the mountains, without even a trail to follow, would be a considerable job.

Russ spiraled down above the tiny settlement and surveyed the only field—the one that the Graham man had said was suitable for landing. Yes, it was, although the slope looked pretty steep, and getting down between the mountains would be no easy job. He *must* make it safely, though. In the rear seat was yeast, which was needed desperately by the townspeople, and also medical supplies for which dozens of wounded

were waiting. The man had said that nearly half the population—the population being largely Mexican and Negro—had been hurt in some way through the storm. A little looting going on, too—a border patrolman would help out in keeping the more vicious element down.

And conditions had been such that a patrolman could be spared. Since the capture of Fellucci, all had been quiet along the Rio Grande. The airmen did not know, as yet, just what Fellucci's promised confession had amounted to. There was a vague rumor that it had been full and complete, and that the smuggling organization was lying low, for a while, to see what effect the confession would have upon the operations of the patrol. Russ himself, along with the other flyers, felt that they were enjoying a much-needed lull before the coming storm.

He was sure there would be a storm—nothing in the past operations of the outlaws gave any reason for thinking that they would give up. They were too powerful, well organized, and cunning for that.

The main business of the patrol was always on Farrell's mind, and now he had to switch his attention back to his work as he caught himself

speculating on when the climax would come—if it did.

He was puzzled about the panorama below, at that. The town was marooned, clearly, but outside of a few trees blown down and several houses badly damaged, it didn't appear that the town had been as badly stricken as the message had indicated.

However, this was no time to think of that, and the big pilot settled to his flying. The mountains were so close together that it took steep banking to spiral the two-ton Douglas down between them, and the wind currents, still very strong, made the air work more difficult. The field, long and narrow, pointed straight up the slope of one mountain, starting from the edge of the trail, which split two hills. Finally, Russ was so deep in the trough that he could find room to spiral no longer. With stick and rudder he threw the ship into a left bank and sideslipped down the slope opposite the field. At the last moment, just above the road, he swung the nose around toward the field as he leveled off, and settled across the fence. He was going fast, but the steep slope stopped the rolling far from the top rim of the rough field.

He had to leave his motor running at seven hundred to keep the ship from sliding backward. Finally, he gave it full gun and taxied to the very top of the field, where he swung the ship sideways. That would keep it from rolling —and it was ready for the take-off, besides, with a half turn.

There'd been considerable excitement in the tiny town as he had spiraled down; so he wasn't surprised to see a battered flivver clattering up the road. The landslide was two miles farther south, the field lying between it and the town.

He was unloading his back-cockpit load when a voice reached him from the chaparral.

"Border patrol, huh?"

A slim young Mexican, his teeth shining in a smile, stepped out of the 'squite. He held a rifle slung under his arm.

Russ nodded. Three men from the flivver were hurrying up the slope, now.

"Want to make some money?" Russ asked the young Mexican. "Watch this ship? See that nobody touches it? Two dollars——"

"Sure!" smiled the good-looking, picturesquely garbed young chap. "But what you doin' here?"

"Bringing food—medicine," Russ returned surprisedly. "Many people hurt?"

"Huh?" grunted the youth before him, his dark eyes staring. "No——"

"Hello, Lieutenant!" blared a loud voice. "Shore glad tuh see yuh! My name's Fiddler, and this is Mr. Hunt! Come on, George! Let's collect this stuff and hustle—it's needed bad!"

He was a big, brawny fellow, dressed in a shabby suit of stained blue, and his red face and loud voice and determined cheerfulness were all very obvious. His companion, a wispy, bow-legged little man of forty or so, with a drooping gray moustache, nodded silently to Russ and gathered up a prodigious number of packages.

" 'Lo, Manuel!" puffed the stout man, with a quick glance at the Mexican a few yards away. "If we need help here—no, we've got 'em all! Come on, Lieutenant! Mischief's brewin' and there's no time t' lose!"

He fairly swept Russ down the slope, with the bow-legged little rider on the other side, all three carrying many packages.

"I'm what passes for mayor in this forsaken hole, Lieutenant," the fat man went on, his

small gray eyes darting to Russ's face. "We're certainly glad you come. Wind's still pretty strong, eh? By the way, what's your name?"

"Farrell—Russ Farrell," replied the flyer. "What's up? You said there was mischief brewing."

"So you're Russ Farrell!"

The beefy mayor stopped short in his tracks, as his eyes played over the stalwart figure of the wide-shouldered young pilot. Then his fleshy cheeks became even rounder, and his mouth widened, and his small, rather hard eyes softened as he chortled with unctuous enjoyment. Even the taciturn little fellow in cowboy garb deigned to smile a wintry smile that deepened the already deep-cut crevices in his thin mahogany face.

"What's the joke?" demanded Russ, suddenly aware of a tingling sensation around his spine. That Mexican had said——

"You'll see, Lieutenant—I won't spoil it none!" chuckled the big man. "But I can say this—we're proud t' have yuh here!"

They piled into the car, and in a moment it was rushing down the narrow, dusty road at

breakneck speed. Four other conveyances met them, full of dirty-looking, ragged men, mostly Mexicans.

"You haven't told me what the trouble is!" Russ reminded them.

"Part of it's needin' this yeast and salt," confided the mayor. "Freaky thing. Only store in town blowed down and took fire. Ain't that tough? But what else I meant was this. There's only five white men in this town right tuhday. And a couple hundred Mexicans and blacks. And some of 'em's been raisin' merry Ned. Most of 'em are workin' on the slide now. You bein' here'll make 'em sing low. They was lootin' some, and gettin' drunk, and robbin' homes, and beatin' it intuh the woods! Swipin' food, too.

"Now, we'll go up here t' my house first and look over this junk. The doc's around somewhere—anyway, he used to be a doctor before liquor got him, but he's all right fur the hurts around here. Broken arms and such."

They clattered up a steep little street, less than two hundred yards long, at right angles to the main street and just at the entrance to the few

blocks of shacks that made the town. A rather tumbledown frame house, once painted white, stood by itself at the highest point of the side street. Russ, although they hadn't gone through the town, could see from afar that there was no wild excitement at the ship's arrival. A very few people, mostly women and boys, had started to walk out toward the ship. He wished he'd taken time to give the Mexican more detailed directions, but the beefy mayor in the spotted suit had rushed him away too swiftly.

They entered a kitchen—a curiously barren kitchen, and all three eased their burdens on to a broad, flat table. Russ was between the two men.

The mayor turned, and his small eyes, a curious glitter in them, met Russ's blue ones as he thrust out his hand.

"Now that my hands is free, I want tuh say that we know of yuh, Lieutenant, and I'm proud tuh shake with yuh!"

The sixth sense that years of hazardous duty had developed in the border patrolman warned Russ then. His eyes grew suddenly grim as the mayor's ham-like paw crushed his. He didn't like the look in the man's eyes, and had half

started to draw away, when, like a flash of light, the big man's other hand shot forward and gripped Russ's free wrist in a bear-like grasp. At the same second the little fellow, his melancholy visage unchanged, moved—and he moved swiftly. Before the struggling pilot could free his hands, the little man's Colt was out of its holster and pointed at him. The man's crinkled eyes were glinting coolly, and he spoke for the first time.

"Be quiet, Lieutenant," he drawled musically. "We ain't aimin' t' hurt yuh—unless yuh make us."

"Not a bit!" declared the mayor loudly, and suddenly he leaped backward with cat-like agility. The next moment he, too, had produced a gun from a shoulder holster. "But, Farrell, yuh can't move a foot—so be quiet!"

Russ's big body was half crouched as his blazing blue eyes darted from face to face. They were narrowed, slightly, as his dazed brain strove to comprehend the meaning of it all. Who were they? How——

"Greetings and salutations, Farrell!"

The big red-head whirled as though he'd been shot.

"Blackie Williams!" he breathed—and wondered whether or not he was in some horrible nightmare.

No, he wasn't. In fact he began to understand, now. Since Williams's escape from jail every force at the law's disposal, including the airplanes, had been searching Texas for him—and here he was in Graham, hidden in the mountains. Everyone figured he'd got across to Mexico. But here he was. Blackie Williams——

"The same!" agreed the tall, sardonic outlaw, coming forward with his customary lounging ease. His dark, hawk-like face showed touches of the pallor born of months indoors, but his luminous dark eyes and mocking smile and easy poise were the same.

He lit a cigarette leisurely.

"It certainly worked out right providential-like," he remarked. "Here I was, hiding in this forsaken hole with every cop in Texas after me, and wondering how I was going to get across to Mexico. And then along comes this lucky little storm to help me out!"

"You can't get away with this!" exploded Russ, his head thrown back and his eyes flash-

ing into Williams's. "I was sent for by this town, and someone'll——"

"No—sent for by Blackie Williams and his pals!" grinned the bold-faced outlaw. "That message into Marfa was 'phoned by one o' my three friends. On the whole, I'd prefer that somebody else had been sent instead of you, and yet it's a privilege and a pleasure t' meet you again. Of course there was a bad storm, and there was a landslide which closes traffic for a while, but maybe me and the mayor here"—Williams's sardonic grin at the title almost made the furious flyer chuckle, himself—"had something to do with seeing to it that all the wires was down. All meaning one telephone cable cut."

It was as clear as crystal to Russ now. This supposed mayor and the taciturn little Southwesterner were accomplices of Blackie's—probably the men who had engineered his jail break in San Antonio. That meant, doubtless, that they were members of the same gang of aërial smugglers to which Blackie confessedly belonged—the gang that the border patrol was after. They'd put in a fake call for help; then hustled

him away when he landed—no wonder the young Mexican had been astonished!

"And what a dumbbell I am!" groaned Farrell aloud.

Williams, lounging easily against the table, chuckled. The other two, their guns in their hands, smiled faintly. The mayor, particularly, seemed to be enjoying the situation.

"Yes, I had t' have a ship," Williams said with considerable satisfaction. "I haven't appeared publicly in town, I may state. So I used this providential storm to take a chance on getting a ship here. By that means, I can get across the border in safety about one hour from now, and also pass over to my distinguished and cuckoo boss one good ship, O.D., for which I will receive from the crazy old coot considerable dinero. Very pleasant, all around."

Pleasant for everybody but the raging pilot whose mind was working like wildfire, trying to figure a way out. The sublime audacity of the jeering Blackie was breath-taking.

"You'll get away in fine shape!" exploded Russ. "Yes, you will! The town folks know I'm here, don't they? Any minute now——"

"Yes, they know you're here. But they also

think the mayor here"—Williams obviously got vast satisfaction out of calling his accomplice the mayor—"is an officer of the law. He is, as far as these simple villagers are concerned. He owns a large collection of second-hand badges. When he came to town two days ago he came, supposedly, looking for me! Wasn't that cute of us? The town—that is, three or four washed-out white men—think you're here at his call, to take him and Tommy here away by air. They won't bother you—or us. They don't need food and have no idea you brought 'em presents."

He threw away his cigarette, and suddenly his dark face grew more serious. As he turned, his bold, reckless profile was outlined against the window.

"Listen, Farrell," he said abruptly. "I'm waiting about fifteen or twenty minutes for another friend of mine. The one that 'phoned you. Then we leave. You haven't got a chance. This house will be deserted after we go. We could tie you up in a jiffy and leave you here—you know that—and get away as easy as A B C. No way of stopping us—our plan's cut and dried. The ninety per cent. ignorant scum of this place

means nothing—the others are all fixed. You admit you haven't got a chance?"

"Yes!" spat Farrell, tense as a drawn bowstring.

"Now, listen, and get me right!" Williams went on with a certain deadly seriousness. "Farrell, you're a blamed good flyer and a blamed good man. I'm willing to doff my plumed chapeau to you any time. As one flyer to another, I'd like to make you a proposition, because I hate to humiliate you—or to leave you tied up here to starve for a day or two. Want to listen?"

Russ strode up and down, his blue eyes like coals of fire. There was no way, apparently, to block them. Why, they were so sure of themselves they weren't even in a hurry! What did Williams have up his sleeve? Some double-crossing offer—a pitfall? No, even the fiery airman couldn't think that. There was in Blackie Williams a colossal audacity that did not bespeak a small or cunning man. Outlaw he was—but, somehow, a man.

"Yes, I'll listen," agreed Russ, and strove to control the jumping nerves that were making his big body quiver under the strain.

"This is on the level," Williams stated, light-

ing a new cigarette. "I don't want to tie you up and leave you. You admit that at present you're helpless. You can walk out of this door right now, if you'll make some promises. Then you can tell any story you like later—your ship was just stolen from your guard, if you've got one, while you were uptown. That is, you can say that, if you want to lie, which I don't imagine you will. You're not that kind.

"Here's the lay. Right now, you can't stop us. If we let you go, I want the word of Russ Farrell, as an officer and a gentleman, that he will not interfere in any manner with my taking off in his ship.

"Get me? You promise not to attempt to stop the flight in any manner. Not by shooting me or trying to capture me; not by interfering with the ship in any way; not by breathing a word to anyone until the minute we're in the air. You can walk out of here now if you want to, get a horse, and find out where the nearest ranch house with a 'phone is, or do anything you want to. Do all you can—after we're in the air!"

Russ's level eyes plumbed deeply into the dark ones before him.

"Why make that offer?" he asked quietly.

"A salute from the flying thug to the flying officer, with assurances of profoundest regard and esteem!" jeered Williams, but his eyes met Farrell's unwaveringly.

For a moment, Russ strode up and down under those menacing guns, trying to decide. Was there no limit to the freakish whims—and boldness—of the devil-may-care Williams? He was showing the old flying spirit, all right. Even in the darkest of war days, there had been mutual liking, respect, and consideration between Boche and Allied flyers—shown in a thousand ways, from dropping flowers on the grave of the man you'd shot down to letting a note fall behind the lines announcing a flyer's capture.

And if he accepted Williams's offer, he'd be free sooner to do whatever could be done—which seemed to be nothing! Well, anyhow, he'd be free sooner if he gave his word than if he let himself be tied up. He'd give it——

Suddenly an idea burst upon the quivering flyer with dazzling splendor. Desperate—yes. Almost impossible—yes. But a chance—and it was up to any border pilot to take any chance

that might bring the mission of the patrol to a successful end.

"You have my word, Williams!" he said suddenly, and held out his hand. His big body seemed to radiate the bounding vitality that filled it, and in his eyes there was a light that seemed like the fire within him peeping through. "I will not attempt to tamper with the ship, to stop you from taking off, or to inform anyone of the matter in any way until you are off the ground."

"Good!" nodded Williams.

"And say, Williams," Russ said, in the sudden silence, "you're a fool to be what you are. You're too good a man!"

Williams grinned sardonically.

"Opinions differ!" he remarked casually, looking out of the window. "People excuse war because of patriotism, don't they? Well, my boss is conducting a private little war of his own that he considers excusable because his purposes are philanthropic. Me? Oh, I don't give a whoop what becomes of all the foreigners of the earth. Tony Norton, whom you got, did. He's nuts too. But I don't mind working for the

old fellow. Of course, stealing army ships, temporarily, isn't precisely what I was taught in church, but self-preservation is the first law of nature."

"So long!" snapped Russ, and with a last look at the tall, dark figure in boots and overalls and flannel shirt, he went out of the door.

He walked leisurely until he was out of sight of the house. Scattered Grahamites, old men, looked at him curiously, and seemed disposed to talk. He did talk to one briefly. A moment later a car was speeding along with Russ in it—a blazing Russ who had forgotten himself once more as his goal became the only thing worth while in life.

A half hour later, with Blackie Williams at the stick and three passengers wedged tightly in the rear cockpit, a Douglas patrol 'plane rose in the cool, windy air, and roared southward through the still sandy atmosphere. The wind was strengthening again as dark clouds hid the noonday sun, but the ship hurtled along above the jagged, ravine-cut mountains, until, finally, with what seemed like a bellow of triumph, it crossed the winding silver ribbon below that was the Rio Grande.

Twenty miles southward into the dark, brooding, mesquite-covered hills of old Mexico, and it was spiraling down above a newly cleared field hidden behind a continuous barrier of low rolling hills.

And Russ Farrell, wedged in the interior of the fuselage, between the rear cockpit and tail surfaces, breathed a prayer of thanks as he heard the roar of the motor finally die, and then felt the bump of the landing.

His freckled face was pale, but there was a grin on it. He did not know where he was, or what would happen if he were discovered—but he was there, and he had not broken his word. With infinite care he had poked a tiny hole in the side of the fuselage as the ship spiraled down, but it was so small he could see nothing, as yet, except the mesquite at the edge of the field.

It had been tight work, there in Graham. But he'd been helped by the fact that the Mexican guarding the ship had been quite willing to keep his mouth shut for ten dollars, and that the few onlookers—few because practically all the ablebodied men had been at work on the landslide—were enough in awe of the patrol to

obey his orders to stand at a great distance and keep that distance, without asking questions, until the ship took off. Then there had been the chance that some of the passengers would stoop down in the cockpit and look back over the seat and see him—but that is a hard and uncomfortable thing to do, and he had gambled that they wouldn't.

Suddenly he stiffened. Three great enclosed-cockpit ships passed before him as the ship taxied along the field. Behind them, in the mesquite, smoke was rising from fires. There were tents. And fully a hundred aliens! Then he could see no more as the Douglas swung into line beside the smuggling 'planes.

They had changed their base, the immigrant-smuggling band. He did not know where he was, but he knew that he was not far into Mexico. The fifty thousand dollars' worth of ships he had seen could carry more than fifteen thousand pounds of cargo—why, with that fleet every man who could be packed into the transports could be easily flown. And the average price for getting an alien into America—as far north as San Antonio, say—was around a thousand dol-

lars. If the smugglers were out for money, they had the means to make it!

And that brought on a thought that caused the reckless young airman's eyes to glow while his body tensed with the strain of waiting. If only they didn't look—and there was no reason why they should look. He was safely hidden from a casual glance from outside.

They didn't make any search. He heard voices, and easily picked out the "mayor's" loud tones. There were excited words in a foreign tongue that sounded like Italian; a good deal of laughing as Williams told his story.

Then a voice said:

"We shall eat, eh? Lunch is ready."

"You've said it, Chief!" Blackie's voice returned, and soon the line was deserted. From fifty or a hundred yards away, though, there was the steady hum of voices, sounding louder than they ordinarily would have because of the ever-stiffening wind that carried them. It was rocking the ship with its force.

Should he wait until nightfall? No, chances for discovery were too great. For a strained minute he listened for any sign of a human being

close to the ship. Then, with the greatest care, he wriggled into the back cockpit. Finally he was hunched down within it, still out of sight.

"I hope their lunch is a good one!" the tense pilot thought to himself, aware of the fact that his heart was pounding like mad.

Every nerve taut, he dared a peep above the cockpit. Not a soul on that side. The ships were facing the rude encampment, which was set many yards back under the trees. On the other side, nothing but the bare field. He was in luck. The best he had hoped to get was some information—and possibly his ship back.

Should he gain speed by flinging himself into the front cockpit, or try to get over into it without being seen?

He decided on the latter. The ship at his right was a partial screen, and the huge motor ahead another. Gathering himself, he dove head first into the front compartment, barely clearing the cowling between.

He thought he heard a startled exclamation from somewhere, but he wasn't sure. Hunched down out of sight, he turned on the gas and primed the hot motor in a split second. Now, if the self-starter——

It worked. The Liberty being still hot, it caught on the first try, and the motor bellowed into life. He had won!

He did not wait to snap his belt as shouts reached him above the motor's idling whisper. With left rudder all the way on and stick over to the right, he gave the ship full gun. For a yard, it leaped ahead, and then turned so abruptly that the wing dragged the ground. Then it was rocketing up the field while vague figures danced before Russ's blazing eyes and men whom he knew were completely at sea—thunderstruck for the moment—dashed after him.

By the time they were shooting, he was out of danger, turning his ship at the end of the rough field and taking off through a fusillade of shots that were totally abortive. As his Douglas took the air, the stalwart pilot threw back his red head and laughed while the sand stung his goggleless eyes and cut his face. The wind, however, was coming up all the time—and he still had work to do. He sobered quickly and took in the lay of the land.

He had an all-metal propeller that nothing could hurt, and a sturdy ship. Before him was

opportunity. Russ looked forward to the glorious gamble with almost ferocious joy.

He banked around, until he was thundering down the field above the transfixed group below —with the wind and a hundred feet high. He nosed down, and his two-ton ship was hurling itself toward the ground at close to two hundred miles an hour. He had his goggles on, now, and his head over the side as his wheels scraped the ground—straight for those ships. Doubtless he'd come down, too—but——

At the last moment, when the first of three closely set transports seemed only inches ahead, he eased back on the stick. A crash—a barely perceptible jar—and he was a hundred yards away. He saw a wheel fall to earth, but he was scarcely aware of it as he looked to see what he had done.

And when he saw he shouted. As he had tried to do, so had he done, apparently: he had caught the first ship's upper wing with his under-carriage. Evidently, he had flipped the whole ship into the air, and over on its back. The first two ships were a tangled mass, one partially on top of the other, and they had been pushed into the third. It was a glorious wreck—too bad the mo-

tors hadn't been turned on so there could be a fire.

He could not resist making one more swoop over the field, to get a look at the staggered band below. Standing a bit to one side, he saw a tall, slender, booted figure raise a hand, and salute.

Blackie Williams was figuratively doffing that plumed chapeau once more.

"Not a bad trade—Blackie for three ships!" Russ assured himself.

The happiest pilot in Christendom flew straight north, momentarily forgetful of the fact that his undercarriage had been crippled. When the river came in sight he remembered, though—and it wasn't a pleasant thought. His ship was bucking and rearing in the now terrific gale, and the ground was almost invisible, as sand flew so thickly that the ship seemed battling a solid substance.

In a trice Russ came to himself and forgot his exultation in the deadly menace of the near future. He took his bearings to locate the place he had come from—about twenty miles south of a point on the Rio Grande ten miles west of Candelaria.

Should he land in the river? The storm was

terrible, now, and his face was torturing him. Only at intervals could he see the ground. He had no undercarriage to depend on, little gas left, and terrible weather to fight.

But he must get home and report if at all possible. Might hurt himself in the river, too—probably would. Help would be far away, if he did. So, climbing to get above the sand, fighting the terrible air currents that boiled up from the mountains, he fought on, dreading the terrible wreck to come.

He might come out of it luckily, though, if the wind held. As he reached the Marfa airdrome, the wind had switched and was with him. The Douglas was shooting along like a streak of light, four thousand feet high, and five hundred above the swirling sand below. Through a rent in that dun cloud under him, he caught sight of the airdrome, and turned into the wind.

It was a shock. The 'plane seemed to stop still in the air as it fought a seventy-mile wind. Back came the throttle to twelve hundred—and then, level in the air, with the wind holding it up, the ship settled like an elevator.

With all his skill, Russ fought to keep it level,

anticipating any falling off. The wind was fairly steady—that helped. Down into the sand that tortured and blinded him, watching air speed and inclinometer and banking indicator, the ship came down ten feet to one foot's progress forward. One thousand feet—five hundred. Twice it had almost fallen off——

The ground! The wind shrieked as though in fury at a mere mortal's escape, but Russ, his face cut in fifty places by the flying sand, was not to be conquered now. A hundred feet high—he could scarcely see the hangars. Then a fleeting rift in the sand cloud gave him a clear glimpse. There came the boys, running, to help him with his ship in the wind—the usually nonchalant Ridgeway in the lead.

Dropping straight down, nose in the air to the last, the Douglas squashed to the ground. Russ lifted his feet just in time as the fuselage spread, and both undercarriage struts poked up through the floor. The lower wings were on the ground, undamaged.

"And so am I," Russ congratulated himself with a grin. "Undamaged!"

To the flyers he stated:

"We've got a little rest coming. There'll be

no smuggling for a while! I'll explain as soon as I've reported and cleaned up a bit. Gosh, guess I swallowed an extra peck of sand."

"And I've a dim suspicion," drawled Ridgeway, eying him keenly, "that no man needed it less."

CHAPTER VII

FOUR MILES HIGH

GENTLEMEN, there is a traitor among you!"

The secret service agent's level words seemed to hang in the still air of the starless night. The little group of tanned, khaki-clad airmen standing in front of headquarters suddenly stiffened, eyes gleaming, muscles taut. Russ Farrell's freckled face paled a bit, and his big body grew rigid.

"So Fellucci said," Graves went on remorselessly. "So now we know."

His remarkably keen eyes swept the circle of tanned faces before him. Captain Kennard, at his side, was appraising his men, too. Russ's blue eyes were caverns of coldly dancing flame. So they *knew*.

Stocky Benson, Russ's tranquil observer, whistled softly under his breath. Even he was brought up standing, Russ thought inconse-

quentially. The very air was electric—suffocating, as it grew oppressive with the weight of unknown menace.

There had been tenseness enough in the atmosphere before Graves had made his startling announcement. This soft, dark night had brought the picked flyers of the border patrol to the end of the trail, ready for the final big battle with the mysterious forces operating from the south side of the Rio Grande.

To Russ, even before Graves had spoken, the towering purple mountains guarding the airdrome had seemed vibrant with all the mystery of the border. The whisper of the mesquite was like the voice of the shadow that held within it the dread secrets of the Big Bend country.

For a few moments, Graves's cool words of explanation and instruction had made Russ forget the whisper of the mesquite.

"Gentlemen," Graves had begun, "we know that the head of the organization that is smuggling these aliens across the border by airplane is a wealthy foreigner, who is sincere in his belief that our immigration laws are wrong. We have discouraged him by our success in turning him back time after time. My agent, watching

in Mexico, informs me that this foreigner plans to make one last trip, a last dash through the air with those countrymen who are in Mexico now. It will probably be to-night.

"When they start, if they do, my agent will inform us by radio. The El Paso flight, reinforced for the night by flyers from Sanderson and Del Rio, as the Marfa flight here has been, will cover the section from El Paso to Sierra Blanca. You, from Presidio to Sierra Blanca. Each will have a sector—half of you at eighteen thousand feet, the other half at ten thousand. Orders are as follows":

And he had given the signals to be used in the event that the smuggling 'planes were sighted by one of the patrol ships, and made clear the method of relaying information. Russ's mind was like molten metal; those signals had instantly sunk into it.

In the seconds of silence that followed, the tense young pilot had heard again the whisper of the mesquite, the voice of the threatening shadow. And then had come Graves's grim announcement:

"Gentlemen, there is a traitor among you! So Fellucci said."

Fellucci! So Fellucci had actually talked, told everything. And he had said there was a traitor in the Marfa flight. Russ's mouth tightened into a bleak line. A traitor! Who—*who*——

But Graves was going on:

"Put on our guard by Fellucci, we have watched. We intercepted a letter at the Marfa Post Office. It contains a statement of our plans in the event of an attempted run across the border, and the warning to make the run all in one trip. And it gives our patrol schedule."

He paused again, his piercing eyes probing the tense faces before him. Russ, impulsive and utterly sincere, whitened under the suspense of it as Graves held up a typed letter.

Who could the traitor be? Every man an airman, a tried and tested veteran.

"This," continued Graves, "is written on the stationery of headquarters, unsigned, addressed to a general address in Carrizo. Written on a portable typewriter, somewhat worn, with characteristics in its typing that cannot be mistaken under the microscope.

"Our information is such that we are sure the traitor is an officer."

The Federal officer's eyes were sweeping back and forth—and this time Russ's face was white as chalk. As he turned his head to dart a look at Benson, beside him, he did not see Graves's eyes come to rest on his face.

After that swift glance at Benson, Russ's heart seemed to freeze. For his friend's face, too, was a haggard mask. In every line of that square countenance, Russ read confirmation of what his brain said was true and his heart said was a lie.

That very day, on patrol, it had happened. Russ had chanced to glance down and had seen an object falling, far below, beneath the ship. Now that Graves had spoken, Russ knew the falling object had been a typewriter in its small black case. He'd been curious for the moment—but the thing had crashed in thick woods, and he was scarcely sure he had seen anything. But now he knew he had. Benson's face showed it, although, after the patrol, he had professed entire ignorance of anything's falling.

"Your effects are being searched now. I call upon anyone who knows or has seen a portable typewriter in this flight, except the official one in headquarters, to tell me, privately, after I am through—which is now. Should the traitor care

to confess—privately and completely—it will be better for him. He will inevitably fail in an effort to escape. The typewriter will be traced—and a typewriter leaves a trail as easy to follow as a fingerprint."

Russ dared not look at Benson again. He felt as if he could not bear the sight of the man's tragic face. His own a mirror of trembling misery, his eyes flamed into Graves's.

He could not believe this thing—and yet, of all that crowd, Benson was most open to suspicion. He'd come from the Philippines—unknown to them all. A name in the Army Register. He might not be the real Benson at all, for that matter. And he had surreptitiously got rid of a typewriter.

In the moment's silence, the fiery young flyer fiercely fought the idea. Benson! The thirty-year-old veteran who knew his way the world around; the quiet, tranquil student of books and life, who had, in many a long talk underneath the border stars, opened to Russ a new and wonderful world; the steady, sane, clear-seeing comrade who was half father and half friend, a balance wheel for the audacious youngster who had grown almost to worship him——

"That's all, gentlemen. Helmets and goggles on, ready to go at an instant's notice. See to your crews—that they do not leave the ships."

Russ did not know how clearly his freckled face mirrored his emotions, and he scarcely realized how Graves's eyes were searching his countenance. The big flyer stood rooted in his tracks when the low-talking group disintegrated. They were suddenly solemn, and the devil-may-care joy of the coming battle had left them. Tex MacDowell, Slim Evans, Jimmy Jennings—none of these could be a traitor. With every minute, the last vestiges of reasonable doubt were being torn from Russ's anguished mind.

"Russ!"

Farrell jumped at the call from the motionless Graves.

"Stay here on the porch for a moment. Captain Kennard and I may want to see you."

The passionless words meant little to Russ then. He sank down on the steps as the two went inside the little headquarters building. His muddled mind, shocked into numbness, strove fiercely to exonerate Benson. For the moment, his own duty in the matter wasn't important.

It just couldn't be his friend! If ever a man

had quietly eased his way into the hearts of his comrades, it was he—and no traitor could do that. Benson's quiet humor; his proved nerve as a flyer, and his utter devotion to duty; the gameness of the man, disqualified as a pilot and willing to fly as an observer to stay with the service he loved so well—all rose to mock the tortured young flyer.

"Farrell! Come in for a moment."

It was Captain Kennard's voice, a curious timbre in its raucous tones. Russ strode into the office and stood at attention.

Graves, trim, immaculate, his demeanor as unruffled as if the air itself were not thick with oppressive significance, met Farrell's flaming gaze steadily. He waited for a moment before speaking, Captain Kennard standing stiffly beside the desk. The C.O.'s scarred face was serious.

"Farrell, tell us what you know about this typewriter!"

Graves's even words were like a lash.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Russ stammered, and his wide shoulders sagged suddenly.

"You know something about this spy—this

man in the Marfa flight whom Tony Norton bought when he was here as a reserve officer!" Graves told him steadily.

Without having moved, the gray-haired officer seemed to have turned into a being of irresistible force. The power of his spirit seemed fairly to glow through his body and to blister the anguished young airman before him.

"I do not!" Russ mumbled.

He didn't! How could he be sure that it *had* been a typewriter that had dropped. What right had he to damn Benson?

"You do!"

Quietly spoken, Graves's words, nevertheless, were like the decree of some omnipotent fate. To Russ, the broad-faced, distinguished-looking Federal man had turned into an all-seeing, all-knowing colossus who was reading his innermost thoughts. How could he know how his lean, tanned face had changed under the shock of the revelations of a few minutes before—and how Graves's experienced eyes had read it?

"Russ, listen!"

It was Captain Kennard, and his gray eyes were cool and deadly.

"You know something. You looked like a ghost out there. Come through—it's your duty and my command!"

Suddenly all the madness pent up in the big red-head's body seemed to burst the bonds that had held it. He could stand the combined torture of those merciless eyes and his own anguished thoughts no longer. The control he had been striving to attain was gone. Words tumbled from his snarling lips.

"I tell you I don't! And if you suspect me, why don't you say so?" he stormed. "I'm only a lieutenant, and I know my place, but, by the mighty, I won't stand here and listen to any more of this from any man, Federal officer or captain or king!"

As he raged on, he was like some lithe young tiger, fighting for his life in the midst of the enemies who would inevitably down him.

"Who are you—either one of you—to doubt my word? Who got Williams? Who fought Norton and captured him? Who went down into Mexico twice and did all a man could do? Who's got a right to be believed?"

In his crazed battle against what he felt were overwhelming odds, his voice cracked and his

eyes were wet with tears of rage. He bounded to the desk and bent over it as if to spring. He had a feeling of horrible helplessness—sooner or later, they'd drag it out of him. And he had no right to incriminate Benson until he *knew*—if they'd only give him a few minutes——

Like a cornered beast, fighting to the last, he rushed on:

"I won't be told I know! Understand that? I won't, when I say I don't know anything!"

He whirled on Kennard, and the Captain, his face troubled and a curious soft look in his eyes, stepped back as if from a blow as he faced a young animal gone berserk.

"You can courtmartial me, arrest me, put me in the jug, or do what you like, either one of you, but I won't——"

"Russ!"

Graves was on his feet. His voice cut through the furious declaration with magnetic force, and his hand on the quivering flyer's arm was somehow quieting.

"What?" spat Russ, a living flame of fury.

"You're the last man on earth we'd suspect," Graves said quietly. "That's all, Russ—for now. But go out, son—and think it over."

Somehow the voice held understanding and pity, and those terrible, probing eyes were soft. The youngster quieted, as if some strange sort of calm had followed the storm. Even the silence, now, was healing to raw nerves.

Thudding footsteps hit the porch, and as a soldier burst in at the door, the eyes of the three turned to him.

The sergeant came to a trembling salute as he stammered in his excitement:

"C-captain, sir, Sergeant—Sergeant Gale's just been found in the 'squite behind the hangars, nearly dead from a crack on the back o' the neck. Just breathin', he is, sir. No more. Looks like he's a goner."

"Get Major Evers!" cracked out Kennard. His command to call the flight surgeon was followed immediately by another curt order.

"And don't let the men tramp up the ground around the spot where Gale fell!"

That second command was Graves's. As the sergeant bolted out, the Federal agent turned—and suddenly that other face of his loomed before Russ's eyes with an effect that made him shiver. Hawk-nosed, drooping-mouthed, with gray eyebrows thrust out belligerently, brow

and chin sloping—Graves's profile was that of a cruel eagle swooping on his prey.

"Shall we go, Captain?" he inquired calmly.

"We shall!" barked Kennard, and they walked swiftly to the door.

Russ waited a moment, gathering his thoughts. Things were coming too grimly fast that night.

Then he bounded out the door, and across the field toward the line of ships. Everyone was out of sight behind the hangars, where Gale lay battered, unconscious—dying, perhaps. Beaten, struck down within twenty yards of the hangars!

To the overwrought pilot it was tangible evidence of the unknown, uncounted enemies lurking in the shadow of the chaparral. The night was an evil thing—this night.

The great landing searchlight was turned on, and as he reached the line of ships, the first men were coming back—carrying Gale.

The men had mobbed the spot before receiving Graves's orders. Major Evers reached the bearers and took charge of the desperately injured man. Unnecessary helpers were dismissed. Russ drew near a group that was finding relief in low, taut speculation.

"But why should anyone attack Sergeant Gale?" came Jimmy Jennings's voice.

"Maybe an accident," suggested the deep bass of George Hickman.

"Not by a long haul," Tex MacDowell sent back. "That was an expert crack on the back of the neck, not an accident."

"Gale isn't particularly well liked, but not a man in the crew knows of anyone on earth who was battling with him," Slim Evans put in. "Well, poor fellow, I'm afraid he's finished. I never liked his looks particularly, but he was a soldier and a mechanic, and I'm sorry these devils got him."

"It's my guess," Hickman's voice broke in again, "that back there in the mesquite one—or more—emissaries of the crowd we're fighting are waiting and watching. Gale went back there for some reason; no one happened to see him go in the darkness; he stumbled across this spy—and was killed."

"Not killed," Benson objected. "It was a bad crack, but he may pull through."

Russ stiffened at the curious timbre in Benson's tones; then relaxed. Perhaps, Russ reflected, it was only his own overwrought con-

dition that made him think Benson spoke even more tensely than the others. Just as Russ was telling himself that, Benson turned his head. Russ found himself looking straight into his observer's eyes—eyes grim and burning.

"Captain Kennard!"

The radio sergeant's voice rang through the oppressive air, and echoed eerily from the frowning hills. A wild thrill shot through Farrell.

"Shoot!" barked Kennard, his voice trembling.

An instant's silence, with a thousand things running through Farrell's head. Hickman's explanation of the murderous attack on Gale rang true—it was doubtless exactly correct. That meant that desperate, hostile eyes were peering from the surrounding darkness.

"No. 13 from Mexico, sir!" shouted the sergeant, on the run across the airdrome. "They've started, sir—four ships!"

"To your ships!" blared Kennard. *"Pronto!"*

Russ ran for his ship, with the others, and a moment later the hounds of the air broke into full cry. For a moment the thought of going into the air with Benson was horrible, but Russ

fought down his nameless fear. And one traitor, if Benson were a traitor, would mean no difference with all those ships in the air.

The warm-up was short, and in less than five minutes Russ was flashing across the airdrome, in the Number 2 position behind Kennard and Graves. In a single file, the ships circled the airdrome, getting altitude, and then, at three thousand feet, sped away across the peaks on their way to the sectors they were to patrol.

Russ was flying southwest toward the spot where his territory joined the river. He was fifteen thousand feet high when he caught sight of the twisting silver ribbon that was the Rio Grande—seventeen thousand feet high as he turned due west to patrol.

It cost Russ an effort of will to turn and look at Benson. His eyes had been awful, back there on the ground, as if he had known what Russ was thinking.

As Russ forced himself to turn, Benson bent forward in the chill gloom, and their eyes met. And suddenly Russ's heart was warm again, and he almost shouted with joyous relief. For there was the old, level-eyed, genial Benson he knew. It was hard to believe that the gently smiling

observer was the same man whose eyes had looked into his on earth. For a second, the whole thing seemed like a bad dream.

But it wasn't. There were many things yet to be cleared up, but now it was not so lonesome to be three miles high in the darkness, riding a frail linen and wood contrivance that hurled itself through the air at more than two miles a minute.

Russ's heart jumped as he felt a steel-like grip on his arm. Benson, his lips moving, was pointing—upward! And they were more than nineteen thousand feet high.

Russ, unbelieving, scanned the sky. For a second he could not believe his eyes. Tiny pin pricks of fire appeared and disappeared in rapid succession almost a mile above them!

The outlaw transports, just crossing the Rio Grande. But so high—it was unbelievable. Their own ship would not go a foot higher in the thin air.

Then, as Benson fell to work on the radio key, to flash the news to the field, Russ realized what the explanation must be. The enclosed cockpits of the transports had been made airtight, and pumps and safety valves installed to keep the air

pressure constant. And the motors had superchargers on them. Truly the unknown fanatic who commanded the smugglers had spared no expense to make his scheme successful. Only a lucky chance had been responsible for their not crossing unseen.

Russ turned to follow them north. Somewhere, within the millions of acres of trackless desolation ahead, there was a landing field where they would land, and he must spot it. His eyes caught the field searchlight, sixty miles away. It was sweeping from horizon to horizon, signaling to the phantom squadron hidden in the night that the outlaws had been spotted. For three minutes it continued—then sudden darkness. On again it went—off again. Three times. Sector three, that meant. Now all the ships would gather—but the outlaws were safe five thousand feet higher than the Douglases, unequipped for high altitudes, could reach. And only by a miracle would any of the other ships even see them, although they would probably find Russ. But it was up to him to follow on alone. He hoped the outlaws wouldn't see him. Twenty miles inland, now, over the very heart of the Big Bend.

He watched those pin pricks of fire unceasingly. The news was being flashed to Donovan Field now, from the Marfa station. Donovan would be on the alert, with fifty ships ready to take the air.

Suddenly Russ's glinting blue eyes narrowed. Three spots of fire ahead, going north; the fourth was coming down. One ship was diving. It was diving at them.

He turned to Benson, but the observer had seen it. He nodded. Both airmen focussed their eyes on that descending ship, and there stirred in the rangy pilot's brain the beginnings of a premonition. That was a terrific dive—the enemy ship was literally flashing through the air, pointed directly at them as if drawn by magnetic attraction.

In a flash Russ cut the gun of the big Douglas.

"It's a scout—and he's spotted us and is coming to get us!"

A queer thought shot through his brain as his flaming eyes held Benson. Here was a test for the man. The Benson who was his friend would face the music. . . .

Benson nodded and grimly turned to his guns. Not a suggestion of shirking the issue. Russ was

aware of a leaping joy. Death might be riding down at them out of the night—but Benson was no traitor!

And death, almost certain death, it was. It was a scout—only a scout could dive like that. It had speed and altitude; it could be swiftly maneuvered. The big Douglas was a lumber wagon by comparison, as helpless as a grizzly bear against the attack of a wasp. Not one chance in a million did they have to fight successfully. But that one in a million they must take. They alone knew where the smuggling ships were. Not only that, it was too late now to do anything else. It was an unequal fight to the death, then. No other border ships were in sight in the dense blackness. Four miles above the earth, with the Big Bend yawning hungrily to receive their shattered bodies, they must stand combat to earn the right to track their quarry to its lair.

The scout was within two thousand feet now, coming like the wind. Just one thing to do, Russ knew. All his self-forgetful devotion to duty, all his love for his service and the country it served, helped him now.

He was just a daredevil youngster whose face

had grown old and tragic—but he was an airman unafraid.

He must wait and, at the last moment, zoom, meet the scout, head-on, for a moment, and trust all to one burst of fire, which he was only too sure couldn't succeed in penetrating the shield of the motor and radiator. Instinctively he felt that it was Blackie Williams in the other ship, flashing so recklessly toward him. Debonair, mocking, audacious Blackie.

"Once I won, and once we split even—now it's your turn," whispered the redhead grimly. "Your turn——"

It was like a physical shock when the motor suddenly ceased.

"I've cut it dead!" roared Benson. "Dive shallow!"

Russ's heart bounded up and nearly choked him. A chance! Without the telltale plumes of flame from the exhaust, they might lose themselves in the darkness—and escape!

He banked steeply, spiraling the while. The roar of the oncoming scout grew ever louder. Now they were out of his way—and he hadn't changed direction. He hadn't missed them yet—didn't know he'd lost them. He was almost even

with them now—and leveling off. In the utter darkness they were invisible.

And then Russ, his eyes ablaze and his body quivering with the wildness of what he was about to do, changed direction as the scout circled in bewilderment. Eyes on the exhaust flames, Russ glided toward the ship like a ghost. Only a low whine of the wires to compete with the bellow of the single-seater's motor. The outlaw was getting a little lower, looking for them. They were close now—three hundred feet below, and three hundred feet behind him.

A moment later, and they were in position. Benson's guns spat fire, for a long thirty seconds.

And the scout went into a dive. Russ shouted an unheard shout as those two bits of fire went ever lower—gliding southward toward the river. Maybe they'd just got the motor enough to cripple it.

"And he probably never knew what hit him!" crowed Russ and turned to his work.

The transports, being heavily laden, were slower and easy to catch. For an hour and a half Russ pursued them, and always Benson was flashing their course to the ground stations.

Donovan Field men could figure where they were. The border ships evidently had been unable to catch up.

Forty miles southwest of Donovan, the sky ahead looked like a flock of fireflies as the field ships flew on watch. Somewhere on ahead the alien ships had an isolated place where they'd planned to spiral silently down, but now they had no chance to escape pursuit. They couldn't have gas enough left to get back to the border, either. They'd know the jig was up, Russ reflected.

Five minutes more, and he had made certain that the Donovan ships had picked up the outlaws. Benson had radioed their height and numbers. Russ was suddenly so weak from the reaction that he could barely sit up. He banked, and flew eastward toward the light-bathed expanse of the great airdrome, four miles from brightly illumined San Antonio.

His night's work was done.

At four o'clock next afternoon, he and Benson were back at Marfa, and an hour later Benson was telling Graves and Captain Kennard,

in Russ's presence, what he had told the young pilot the night before.

The smugglers and their cargo, evidently realizing their helplessness when the Donovan ships had swarmed below them, had landed at the field and surrendered meekly. The black-bearded millionaire who had brooded so long over the fancied injustice to his countrymen of restricted immigration was in jail with his pilots, still maintaining the justice of his cause. Because he had been a philanthropist of note for years, and because of his impressive sincerity and senile fanaticism, the papers were hinting that he'd be let off with a tremendous fine—several hundred thousand dollars—and mercifully deported, with his smuggled countrymen, to their native land.

Sergeant Gale was conscious at last, but Major Evans had not yet allowed anyone to question him about the attack that had so nearly ended his life. The sergeant would probably pull through, to face the penalty for his treachery, but he was still so weak that the flight surgeon would take no chance of having him excited.

These were the things Graves talked of cas-

ually, there in the office, until Benson started his confession.

"I struck down Gale, sir—and I got rid of his typewriter for him," the observer said quietly. "Years ago, I killed a man—in self-defense. The evidence against me was slight; so, rather than plead guilty and self-defense, I was silent —and acquitted for lack of evidence.

"Gale was born in the same town, and he knew the truth. We were both in our teens. Two years ago, in the Islands, I ran into him. He had been an eyewitness of what had happened years before. He'd changed into a sneaky crook. He tried to blackmail me. I didn't fall for that, although he could have caused me years of torture by exposing me and forcing me to stand the notoriety.

"He didn't insist, but used his hold on me for slight favors, such as extra leave. We were stationed together here. Yesterday—he must have become aware that you were watching closely, and was wise enough to know that an intercepted letter would hang him—he asked me to get rid of the typewriter for him. He didn't dare, evidently, to try to do it himself. I had no idea why he wanted me to, but I weakly consented,

carried it under my flying suit yesterday morning, and dropped it from the ship. Russ saw it, accidentally.

"When you spoke last night, I had a hunch, of course, that Gale was your traitor. It was like him. I wanted to make sure, however. I was walking behind the hangars, to be alone, thinking of how best to put it up to him, when he came strolling out there himself. It was purely accidental that neither of us was noticed going there. I put it up to him, and learned the truth. His threats to ruin my army career meant nothing, of course, and I told him so.

"He started to make a break for the mesquite when he saw he couldn't bluff me and that his goose was cooked. I meant merely to stun him, stop him with a tap from a stake that happened to have been lying on the ground. I'd snatched it up, hoping to scare him into surrendering to me. But he whirled and tried to get away. I struck, thinking only to stop him, but we were both running, and the blow went wild.

"I didn't confess at once, because I was afraid it would keep me on the ground last night, and I wanted to be in the air.

"That's the truth. In private with you, Mr.

Graves, I can prove every word—and I think my record absolves me from any suspicion of having been in league with Gale. I'm not proud of unquestioningly doing him the mysterious favor of getting rid of his typewriter for him because I was afraid of him. But I did. I've played the coward, but I'm cured."

That was all, and a bit later the stocky, quiet observer had a long conference with Graves and came out exonerated.

Two lazy days, and then a letter came from Mexico, addressed to Russ. It was from Blackie Williams and held but a brief greeting.

Congratulations to you all. You stopped us. *Adios* and good luck.

WILLIAMS.

It *had* been he in that scout—and he'd evidently limped into Mexico before landing.

Three weeks later, and the camp was stripped. The enlisted men were entrained for San Antonio, and six Douglases in formation circled for the last time over the airdrome. They were winging their way north, their duty done.

In Number 2 position, a rangy, red-headed pilot looked down on the country below as the

V thundered northward. Leaving that region, Russ felt a curious pang. Desolate, sun-baked, unconquered strip of wilderness it was, but its raw majesty called to something in him. Blistering days and star-filled nights, wild adventure and man-killing hardship—that was the border. But the fascination of it had caught and held unnumbered thousands before him, and its wild call had never been stilled for them—nor would it be for him.

He wondered, with a curious pang within him, whether he'd ever see it again—look down on its towering mountains and far-stretching mesquite, the river a twisting silver snake and Mexico lying vast and dark and silent. Some day he'd like to fly over Mexico.

Wishes sometimes come true, but Russ could not know that his would. And so, just before they crossed the last peaks, he looked back. He grinned a wry grin at smiling Benson, and, half whimsically, half seriously, lifted his hand in silent farewell to that wild remnant of the primeval on the banks of the Rio Grande.

THE END

Russ Farrell

Border Patrolman

Burtis

DOUBLEDAY
PAGE & CO.